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Course Guidebook

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Professor Davis has presented academic papers at international conferences in more than a dozen countries and has been invited to lecture at such distinguished institutions as Harvard University, Boston College, the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, East China Normal University, the University of Munich, the University of Freiburg, and the Royal Institute of Philosophy in London. For his research sojourns in Japan and Germany, he has received grants from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, the German Academic Exchange Service, and Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. He also received the Nachbahr Award for outstanding scholarly accomplishment in the humanities from Loyola University Maryland.

Professor Davis is the author of *Heidegger and the Will*, the coeditor of *Japanese and Continental Philosophy* and *Engaging Dōgen's Zen*, and the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*. ■

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REAL ZEN
FOR REAL LIFE

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that has thrived for 15 centuries in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It is a rigorous spiritual discipline that aims at liberating oneself and all other sentient beings from suffering. It also has the aim of living a fulfilling and fully engaged life in harmony with others in society and within the natural world as a whole.

This course offers a thorough and engaging introduction to both the practice and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. It both provides clear and in-depth explanations of the real teachings and practices of this ancient Asian tradition, and it relates those teachings and practices to the real lives of 21st-century Westerners. It is ideally suited for those who wish to both learn about the philosophical teachings and also engage in the practice of Zen, especially its central practice of meditation.

To understand what Zen is about, it is vital to undertake a serious study of its teachings and to engage in the actual practice of Zen. The word *Zen* means "meditation," and Zen meditation is a practice of clearing the heart-mind. For Zen, an open mind entails an open heart, and this open heart-mind is the source of both creativity and compassion. Several of the lessons in this course focus on the practice of Zen meditation. Periodic meditation checkups offer strategies for dealing with common issues that arise and guidance for developing and deepening a practice of meditation.

The first lesson of the course questions some preconceptions and popular images that we may have in order for us to recover what Zen calls the beginner's mind. The second lesson goes to the core of Zen as a path of self-discovery that leads, paradoxically, through a process of self-forgetting. The next two lessons then explain Zen meditation and how to practice it. After that, several lessons explain, from a Zen perspective, the basic teachings of Buddhism, including the Middle Way between indulging and repressing desires as well as the problem of spiritual suffering that is rooted in our resistance to impermanence, our excessive cravings, and our misunderstanding of the nature of the self.

The course goes on to clarify Zen's understanding of the nature of the self in relation to other selves and the world as a whole. It also clarifies Zen's teachings regarding karma, morality, nature, art, language, and spirituality as well as physical death and rebirth. It explains what it means to bring one's mind into a state of concentration and stillness while on the meditation cushion and what it means to dwell in the zone of Zen during daily activities. The course ends with an elucidation of the Ten Oxherding Pictures, a classic and beloved set of pictures and verses that summarize the stages a practitioner goes through on the path of Zen. ■

WHAT IS ZEN?

RECOVERING THE BEGINNER'S MIND

LESSON 1

Zen practice aims to bring us down to earth—to the here and now of our real lives. It is largely about clearing our hearts and minds. Actually engaging in this practice is vital to understanding what it is all about. Zen meditation is a practice of clearing the heart-mind. Metaphorically, it is about emptying one's cup.

Emptying One's Cup

- The way of Zen itself is a matter of continually emptying one's cup, clearing one's mind, and returning to what in Zen is called the beginner's mind. The 12th-century Chinese Zen master Dahui implores: "Do not lose the heart and mind of a beginner for an instant." The beginner's mind is an open mind. A know-it-all is incapable of learning anything.

- The Greek philosopher Plato points out the paradox that in trying to learn about something new, we need to already have some knowledge of what we are looking for. Otherwise, how would we even know what to look for, and how would we know when we've found it?

- The problem Zen calls our attention to is that we tend to think we know all too much about what we are looking for. The problem is that we have lost the beginner's mind: our original and innocent openness to the world.

Debunking Medieval and Modern Reconstructions

- When we open a book on Zen, we need to ask ourselves: What is already in our cup? What preconceptions about Zen fill our minds and will perhaps get in the way of learning about it?

- In the West, Zen has connotations of being hip, cool, liberal, and progressive. In Japan, by contrast, Zen is usually associated with the severe discipline of a conservative religious establishment, while Christianity has connotations of being modern and even fashionable.

- The cultural appropriation of Zen in the West has often been insufficiently critical and self-critical. However, in Western academia these days, the pendulum has swung in the other direction. Today, the trend is to use historical and philological scholarship to debunk the spiritual and romantic image of Zen fashioned by earlier generations of writers, an image that still circulates in popular culture.

- In erudite books with clever titles like *Chan Insights and Oversights* and *Seeing through Zen*, this critical—and sometimes polemical—debunking is aimed in part at the ways in which Asian and Western authors such as D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts have presented Zen to Westerners. Yet their critique is also aimed at the traditional self-conceptions and self-presentations of the Zen tradition throughout its 1,500-year history.

- Applying the historical-critical methods of modern biblical studies, scholars of Buddhism have shown that canonical Zen texts were in fact written down and revised by later generations of monks rather than being literal transcripts of the words of the masters. However spiritually inspiring and philosophically rich such classical texts of the Zen tradition may be, we cannot read them as unbiased and unembellished historical records or as innocent of sectarian politics and other mundane motives.

- Taking Zen's lessons seriously certainly need not mean that one is taking Zen's lore literally. After all, the texts of the Zen tradition were not written as academic history books.

- When reading a parable, it does not matter so much whether the events actually happened exactly as they are being told—or even if they happened at all. For Zen Buddhism, historical narratives do matter. But what matters most to sincere Zen practitioners is

how the teachings embedded in those stories can illuminate and change our lives—not when, where, and by whom they were first taught and written down.

Modern Western Zen

- The living tradition of Buddhism has always been concerned with applying traditional teachings to the here and now of people's real lives rather than with preserving them as relics in a museum or transcribing them as chronicles in a history book. We do not live in 9th-century China or in 13th-century Japan. We have a lot to learn from Zen masters who did live then and there, but in the end, we must apply their lessons to our lives here and now.

- Buddhism was first introduced to China in the 1st century CE. Later, starting in the 6th century in China, Zen was formed by way of a creative synthesis of Buddhist teachings and practices imported from India with Chinese traditions, especially Daoism. Centuries after that, starting in the 12th century, Zen was brought to Japan.

- There, for eight centuries, it developed in conjunction with Japanese culture and sensibilities. Over the course of the last century, Zen has been imported to the United States and other Western countries, initially from Japan and later also from Korea, China, and Vietnam.

- In the West, Zen has continued its development, now in dialogue with Western traditions such as German idealism, English Romanticism, American transcendentalism, medieval Christian mysticism, and modern psychology. The teachings of Zen have been deployed in the West in opposition to both religious fundamentalism and antireligious secularism. Zen teachings have also been used to critique consumerism, technological destruction of and alienation from nature, and other perceived ills of the dominant and domineering worldviews and lifestyles of the modern West.

Realizing Zen: Here and Now

- Zen can only become real for us insofar as we allow this Asian tradition to take root in our real lives in the modern Western and Westernizing world. The 20th-century Japanese Zen philosopher Nishitani Keiji liked to use the English verb *realize* since this word can mean both "to attain an understanding" and also "to make real" or "to actualize."

- In this double sense, our task is to realize what Zen is. On the one hand, realizing what Zen is means understanding what it has been, and this requires opening our minds and trying our best to understand the teachings and practices passed down by Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian masters. On the other hand, to fully realize what those teachings and practices can mean for us, we have to relate them to our real lives.

- Zen kōans are the often-enigmatic and paradoxical stories, dialogues, sayings, or questions assigned as topics of meditation and used to trigger and test a student's awakening. To attain such an awakening, we are told that we must "interlock our eyebrows" with past Zen masters and learn to see with their same eyes.

- Yet the Zen tradition also recognizes that its universal and timeless truths must manifest themselves differently for different people in different times and places. Zen is neither a matter of subjective opinion nor a matter of objective doctrine; it is a matter of universal truths manifesting in ways and words appropriate to particular times and places.

- The term *real* in the quest for "real Zen" thus cuts both ways. On the one hand, we are not trying to flee our present circumstances and transport ourselves back in time or to another land. Nor are we just interested in a detached study of the history of other people's beliefs and practices. We want to know what Zen can mean for our own lives.

- On the other hand, we want to set aside our prejudices and preconceptions to open ourselves to what Zen masters who lived in the past have to teach us. We will inevitably need to meet them in the middle, so to speak, but getting there requires that we question our presuppositions about both Zen and ourselves. We especially need to be open to the possibility that Zen may be able to teach us about ourselves.

The Zen School of Buddhism

- The practice of Zen can be and has been undertaken by persons of all religious and secular worldviews. Zen meditation in particular is practiced today by many Jews, Christians, and people of other faiths, by people who do not consider themselves religious at all, and by many people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious.

- In his books *Buddhism Without Beliefs* and *Secular Buddhism*, the contemporary author and former Zen monk Stephen Batchelor argues that the core teachings and practices of Buddhism do not depend on any religious beliefs or traditional rituals.

Accordingly, he thinks they speak to people today who are looking for a spiritual path without all the religious traps and trappings.

- On the other hand, a modern Japanese Zen master, Yamada Kōun, used to tell his Christian students in effect that he wanted them to practice Zen to become better Christians—not to become Buddhists. Some of those Christian students are Catholic priests and nuns who went on to become Zen teachers without ceasing to be Christians.

SUGGESTED READING

Heine, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow*.

McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West."

Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What really is Zen? How has it has been repackaged by advertisers and watered down in the pop culture of the West?

2 How should modern Westerners who are interested in Zen go about adopting and adapting its teachings and practices?

THE ZEN WAY TO KNOW AND FORGET THYSELF

LESSON 2

Depending on the context, we introduce ourselves in different ways. For instance, one might introduce himself as a father, husband, brother, or professional in different situations. We all carry around a number of identity boxes, and we habitually define ourselves and others with the labels on these boxes. In fact, life in society requires that we do so. This lesson digs deeper than the kind of self-introductions found on a business card, webpage, or resume. It introduces the path of Zen as a path that begins with the injunction to know oneself.

Know Thyself

- The 14th-century Japanese Zen master Daitō Kokushi called the practice of Zen an "investigation into the matter of the self." Such an investigation may at first seem unnecessary because we all tend to assume that we already know ourselves, and so we generally neglect to even ask the question, much less succeed in finding the answer.

- The injunction to know oneself can be found in many traditions, including the Western philosophical tradition that goes back to Socrates. According to Zen, however, to truly discover what the self is, we need a more direct path than mere intellectual reasoning. The best path to attain an intuitive knowledge of ourselves is a holistic practice of meditation.

PHAEDRUS

In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that one should not waste one's time on investigating mythological stories of gods and other unusual creatures.

- Many Westerners are interested in Zen more out of a kind of curiosity about something that seems exotically foreign and mystical than out of a genuinely philosophical and spiritual quest for self-understanding. If such cultural curiosity were our sole motivation for learning about Zen, Socrates would rightly scold us and tell us that we should first and foremost strive to know ourselves.

- Another lesson from Socrates also resonates deeply with Zen: Socrates reminds us that a genuine quest for self-knowledge begins with the realization that we don't already know who—or even what—we are. The journey to wisdom begins with an acute awareness of one's ignorance.

- Socrates's teaching resonates around the globe with a line from the *Daodejing*: "To know that one does not know is best; not to know but to believe that one does is a disease." Another chapter of the *Daodejing* tells us, "Those who study [doctrines and rituals] increase day by day, while those who practice the Way, the Dao, decrease day by day."

- Instead of accumulating more and more information, Daoist sages practice letting go of unnecessary mental and emotional baggage, clearing their minds and hearts of all excess clutter, until they are able to wander freely in attunement with the natural way of the world. Among the many teachings that Zen inherits from the Daoist tradition is this emphasis on a return to simplicity and naturalness.

Zen as a Path of Meditation

- Zen, in the end, is a path for all human beings who are sincerely interested in coming to know themselves. It is important to note, though, that despite some significant similarities, there are also some important differences between the path of Zen and that of other religions and philosophies. These are differences in methods and in results.

- Zen does not ask one to pray to or believe in an external God or Buddha. Like Socrates, it stresses the importance of seeking knowledge rather than relying on blind faith. It especially stresses seeking knowledge of oneself.

- There are intriguing accounts of Socrates standing motionless for hours, apparently absorbed in a meditative state. However, for the most part, Socrates's method was that of discursive rational inquiry, and he thought this was best done by disengaging the mind from the body. The Zen path is a more holistic one that engages the whole body, mind, heart, and spirit.

- Contrary to some popular opinions and partial teachings, Zen is not, in the end, opposed to rational thought. But it does teach that we need to dig down beneath the intellect by means of meditation, rooting intellectual knowledge in a deeper, more holistic wisdom.

- Arguments must be based on insights. Otherwise, they degenerate into self-serving sophistries or, at best, abstract theories with little impact on our lives. For the most enlightening, most life-changing insights, we need a method that engages the body, heart, and spirit as well as the mind. We need to root the intellect in an embodied-spiritual practice of meditation.

- As a school of Buddhism, Zen tradition traces itself back to Shakyamuni Buddha, the man whose personal name was Siddhartha Gautama. He lived in India around 500 BCE. Ever since Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi Tree, meditation has played a vital role in all schools of Buddhism. It is especially central in Zen Buddhism.

- Legend has it that about 1,000 years later, Zen was brought to China by a monk named Bodhidharma. Seven centuries after that, around 1200 CE, it was transmitted to Japan by monks like the Zen master Dōgen.

Buddhism's Sutras and Zen Buddhism

- Buddhism has many traditions and schools, each of which is based on a particular sutra or set of sutras. All sutras claim to be the teachings of the Buddha, but they were all were written down much later. The earliest sutras, the ones that make up the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, were first written down four centuries after the Buddha died.

- The sutras that form the scriptural basis of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, which has thrived in central and eastern Asia, were composed starting in the 1st century BCE, many being translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the end of the 2nd century CE. When these scriptures were brought from India to China, the different schools of Chinese Buddhism distinguished themselves from one another by claiming that one sutra or another is the pinnacle of the Buddha's teaching.

- The Zen school, however, is different. While Zen Buddhists do study and chant many sutras and other texts, the Zen school is unique in that it does not claim to be based on any written teachings but rather on the Buddha's actual experience of enlightenment itself. This experience of enlightenment is said to be attainable by all human beings, insofar as the Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind is universal.

- In other words, all human beings have the same underlying nature and mind as the Buddha. Yet this Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind must be realized, awakened to, and actualized. The best method for doing so is the one that the Buddha himself used: meditation.

Fast the Mind, Forget the Self

- The legendary Daoist sage Zhuangzi, whose writings were particularly influential on Zen, spoke of a meditative practice of "sitting and forgetting." He also referred to this as a practice of "fasting the mind."

- We need to unlearn our prejudices—our prejudgments about ourselves and others—so that we can open our minds to what is really there and therefore become at least a little more aware of the "spin" imposed on our experience of reality by our swirling thoughts, feelings, and desires.

- The problem isn't that we don't have a grip on reality. The real problem is that we generally have too much of a grip on reality, in the sense that we are willfully grasping the world and forcefully trying to reshape it to fit into the boxes we have fashioned. Meditation is a temporary relaxing of the attachment to our own edited version of reality.

Conclusion

- The self, Zen tells us, is empty. But emptiness here equals openness. To be open is to be responsive, and to be responsive is to be creative as well as compassionate. Creativity is not a forceful act of imposing one's project on the world; it is rather a responsive participation in events of interactivity.

- Great artists rarely claim sole authorship of their works. They speak of influence and inspiration, of losing themselves in the creative flow, of being spoken to by their materials and guided by their tools, and of gratitude to their supporters and their audience.

- Only in the midst of all these interconnections can an artist do his or her part in producing good art. This is true of all of us in all that we do. In the end, we discover ourselves not by retreating from but rather by fully engaging in the interconnections that make up the world we live in.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "The Presencing of Truth."

Nishitani, "The Standpoint of Zen."

Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Zen's method of investigating the self compare with that of Socrates?

2 What does the Zen master Dōgen mean when he says that "to study the self is to forget the self"?

ZEN MEDITATION: CLEARING THE HEART-MIND

LESSON 3

The practice of seated meditation is termed *zazen* in Japanese. In Zen temples and monasteries today, there are many activities, such as chanting and prostrations, that take place. Nevertheless, zazen is the core practice. It is also the focus of this lesson.

The Point of Zazen

- The point of practicing zazen is to awaken to one's original heart-mind. The term *heart-mind* is hyphenated because in Chinese and Japanese, the word for *heart* and *mind* is written with the same sinograph, or Chinese character: 心. These languages and cultures don't tend to separate the locus of thinking and the locus of feeling. For Zen, an open mind entails an open heart, and vice versa.

- Another way to think about the point of zazen is to look at it as a way to realize—to discover and allow to function—the clarity and purity of the original heart-mind that is already there, buried beneath our karmic baggage of egoistic delusions and desires. Karmic baggage manifests as the distracting thoughts, emotions, and desires that will probably assault you as soon as you try to settle into a practice of meditation.

- In the beginning, you will likely experience meditation as a struggle. It is a very odd struggle, since it is a struggle between the part of you that wants to meditate and the part of you that does not. That is the first moment of self-discovery: the realization that the self is complicated and often at odds with itself.

- Zen meditation is first of all about facing up to this complicated and self-contradictory nature of the self. Next, it is about digging down to the deepest and truest part of ourselves—our "original mind."

THE BUDDHA-MIND

The term *Buddha-mind* means a truly awakened mind. Another way to think of it is as the original mind that we are trying to wake up to. Meditation is the most direct means of uncovering and activating this Buddha-mind.

Bodhidharma's Definition of Zen

- A classic definition of Zen has been attributed to Bodhidharma, the semilegendary figure who reportedly brought Zen from India to China in the late 5th or early 6th century CE. He is said to have characterized Zen with the following four phrases:
    - Not relying on written words.
    - A special transmission outside all doctrines.
    - Pointing directly to the human heart-mind.
    - Seeing into one's true nature and becoming a Buddha.
- Consider this as a takeaway message: The real point of Zen cannot ultimately be either expressed or grasped in the form of scriptures or in formulaic doctrines. Ultimately, the point of Zen can only be directly pointed to.
- It cannot be grasped through words and concepts, which are, at best, secondhand traces of someone else's direct experience. It must be immediately experienced firsthand, and this is best done through the practice of meditation. Real Zen must be realized through zazen. The point is not that texts and doctrines are untrue, but rather that, on their own, they cannot fully capture or embody the truth.

Three Levels of Wisdom

- One problem with relying on texts and teachings is that we mistake secondhand or thirdhand knowledge for firsthand experience and understanding. The Buddhist tradition has long recognized there to be three levels of wisdom: received wisdom, intellectual wisdom, and experiential wisdom.

- Received wisdom is acquired through reading traditional texts or listening to a trustworthy teacher and committing those doctrines to memory. Attaining intellectual wisdom requires a more active and critical use of one's intellect, such that one comes to a clear understanding of why a teaching makes sense.

- For instance, professors typically want students to start by carefully reading the assigned texts and attentively listening to lectures. But professors also want them to move from received to intellectual wisdom.

- Even in the best-case scenario, however, much of the learning that happens in schools and universities stops at the level of intellectual wisdom. At best, this learning prepares students to go out into the "real world" and, through real-life experiences, to take the intellectual knowledge they attained in the classroom and turn it into the kind of experiential wisdom that changes their lives, allowing them to more positively affect the lives of those around them.

- The Buddhist tradition, at its best, promotes a holistic practice that includes, but is not limited to, intellectual thinking. It encourages practitioners to engage in embodied meditative practices and to let the teachings imbue their daily lives so that they reach the level of experiential wisdom. For it is only experiential wisdom that is truly liberating and life changing.

Zen Among Other Forms of Meditation

- The practice of meditation goes back more than 3,000 years in India, predating even the earliest scriptures of Hinduism. The sixth chapter of the most famous Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, gives explicit instructions for practicing dhyana yoga, the spiritual discipline of meditation.

- Inspired by Zen and other Asian traditions, some Christians have gone back to the Desert Fathers to recover meditative practices of prayer involving repeating a biblical phrase like a mantra. Trappist monks have developed a silent practice of centering prayer. Jewish Kabbalists and Muslim Sufis have their own practices of meditation. In China, Daoists were practicing meditation long before Buddhism was introduced in the first century of the Common Era.

- There are many different methods of meditation, and different methods naturally produce different experiences. There are also different motivations to meditate, including relaxation, improving concentration, and to focus one's prayerful relation with God, among others. In Zen, one can meditate to live life more fully, with fewer attachments and with more freedom, flexibility, and concern for the wellbeing of all beings.

- The Buddha taught two kinds of meditation: concentration and insight. Whereas some schools of Buddhism distinguish more sharply between the preparatory practice of concentration and the liberating practice of insight, Zen tends to view concentration and insight as two sides of the same coin: When the mind is cleared, settled, and focused, it naturally attains insight and manifests its innate wisdom.

- The Buddha taught the Eightfold Path as the way to enlightenment. Its eight limbs are grouped into three categories, which are broken down as follows.
  The first category is wisdom, and it consists of:

  1. Right view.

  2. Right intention.

- The second category is morality, consisting of:

  3. Right speech.

  4. Right action.

  5. Right livelihood.

- Most relevant to this lesson is the third category, which is meditation. It consists of:

  6. Right effort.

  7. Right mindfulness.

  8. Right concentration.

- The term *right effort* here does not mean simply trying hard. It specifically indicates the meditative process of training the mind to let go of negative states of mind and cultivate positive ones.

Zen meditation aims to suddenly awaken us to our innate virtues of wisdom and compassion, from which we have become alienated through the "three poisons" of ignorance, avarice, and aversion—or, in stronger language, delusion, greed, and hate.

Subtraction Zen

- Zen meditation is a matter of emptying or clearing the heart-mind. It is a matter of subtraction rather than addition. Real Zen is not about accumulating new tricks and trinkets, nor is it about putting on the robes and airs of a new persona; it is about shedding such acquisitive and self-aggrandizing desires and attachments.

- The other side of the coin of subtraction Zen is vow-vehicle Zen. According to the Mahayana Buddhist teachings of Zen, by way of clearing our heart-minds, we free ourselves up for becoming pure vehicles of the great compassionate vow to enlighten and liberate all "sentient beings"—that is, all beings who are capable of suffering. Traditionally, Zen meditation is undertaken in the spirit of this vow, which both motivates and is deepened by the practice.

- At first, meditation can seem downright boring and unproductive. After all, when one meditates, one is not really doing much of anything at all. Indeed, the less the better. However, don't flee from boredom. Go all the way into it; go all the way through the bottom of boredom. The place of rest you seek lies beneath, not beyond, your restless mind.

- Zen meditation is a practice of pausing our busy lives so that we can clear out the busy mess of our minds. It is a practice of clearing, emptying, opening, cleaning, and purifying the heart-mind—or rather, it is a matter of waking up to its original openness and purity.

Beneficial By-Products

- While at its core Zen meditation is a method of subtraction, there is also a lot to be gained from the periphery of the practice. Specifically, Zen meditation has the following wonderful side effects:

  1. Improvement in posture and psychophysical well-being.

  2. Increase in ability to concentrate.

  3. Decrease in stress level.

  4. Increase in natural creativity and problem-solving ability.

  5. Recovery of sincerity and improvement in interpersonal relations.

- In taking time for meditation, one first of all learns to be kind to oneself. One calmly notices all the negative thoughts and feelings that have been tying one up in knots. No longer feeding

them any more mental and emotional energy, one lets these negative thoughts and feelings drift off like storm clouds in the open expanse of a blue sky.

- Ultimately, the practice of Zen meditation awakens an inner confidence that is both firm and flexible. This confidence entails the kind of firmness that does not inhibit flexibility but rather makes it possible—like the axis pole supporting a seesaw or balancing a spinning top.

SUGGESTED READING

Cleary, *Minding Mind*.

Omori Sogen, *An Introduction to Zen Training*.

Uchiyama, *Opening the Hand of Thought*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Zen meditation compare to other forms of meditation?

2 What is the ultimate aim and what are the proximate benefits of practicing Zen meditation?

HOW TO PRACTICE ZEN MEDITATION

LESSON 4

This lesson covers the basics of how to practice Zen meditation—that is, zazen. Traditional instructions generally include four steps in which one carefully attends to the place or environment, to bodily posture, to the breath, and to the mind. The lesson addresses each of these in turn.

Attending to the Place or Environment

- The place or environment includes not only where, but also when and for how long you sit. This course recommends that you begin with short 10-minute meditation periods that take place once or twice a day. Over several weeks, gradually lengthen your meditation periods to 25 minutes, even if you can only find time to do this once a day.

- Even for an experienced meditator, it often takes 10 or 15 minutes to really settle into a meditative state, so it is not surprising that the minimum length of time for a meditation period in temples and monasteries is usually 25 minutes. Meditation periods in monasteries can be as long as 50 minutes or more, but this is appropriate only if it does not cause too much discomfort and if one is able to maintain concentration for that long.

- As for when to meditate, traditionally favored times are dawn and dusk. There is indeed something special about these twilight hours that belong neither to the hectic daytime nor to the slumbering nighttime. The earth and sky seem to emit their most meditative atmosphere at dawn and at dusk.

- However, it is of course possible to meditate at any time of the day or night, so just find a time that works best for you. Transition times in your daily routine are often a good place to wedge in a meditation period. This also allows you to begin your next activity with a refreshed mind and disposition.

- Finding and cultivating the right space for meditation is very important. Although it should not be too cold or too hot, it is best to have exposure to fresh air. Natural sounds or even the white noise of city streets will likely not disturb you, but loud sounds and especially voices will, so it is best to find as quiet a place as possible. Quality incense that does not produce too much smoke can be very conducive.

- It is important that your meditative space be clean and uncluttered. The mind tends to reflect its environment, which is why you probably find that cleaning your room feels like you are also cleaning your mind. You may wish to have an image in your meditation space, such as a figure of the Buddha or a bodhisattva.

- Last but certainly not least, preparing the environment entails getting your cushions, bench, or chair ready. Various sitting positions are possible. The most important part of the posture is from the waist up, which will be the same whether you are sitting in a cross-legged or kneeling position. It will also be the same whether you are on the floor or on a chair.

- If you are going to sit on a chair, it is best to have one that is not too high or too low and that has a flat seat with firm padding. If you are going to sit on the floor, it is best if you have a large flat square cushion called a *zabuton* and also a smaller round or rectangular cushion called a *zafu*. These can be easily ordered from online stores. It is also possible to fold a blanket or two into the shape of a zabuton and to fold a beach towel or two into a zafu.

Attending to the Body

- Now that you've attended to your environment, it's time to turn your attention to your bodily position. Be sure to wear loose and comfortable clothing. If you are going to sit on a chair, perch yourself on the front of the chair without leaning against the back, with your knees at a 90° angle and with your legs perpendicular to the ground. If this is difficult for you, then you can sit all the way toward the rear of the chair so that your back is supported in an upright posture.

- A normal cross-legged position is not good for meditation. This is for two reasons. One is that it doesn't provide a stable base. The other is that it does not support a naturally straight back, so it cramps the deep-breathing space of your lower abdomen.

- All of the recommended cross-legged positions require some flexibility. However, bear in mind that you should be careful to avoid any intense joint pain or excessive discomfort. Your body position should not distract you more than it helps you to get into a state of ultimately peaceful concentration. For details on several types of cross-legged positions—including the Burmese, half lotus, and full lotus positions—refer to the audio or video lesson.

- For many people, cross-legged postures are not viable options. You may want to try a kneeling position. In Japan, sitting on your heels with your legs folded under you is called *seiza*, which means "correct sitting." This is how one sits on formal occasions.

- The drawback to seiza is that your legs will probably quickly fall asleep. In this case, there are two ways you can take the pressure off of your legs in a kneeling position. You can take the zafu, turn it vertically, and slide it between your legs. Alternatively, you can acquire a wooden kneeling bench, which is placed over your calves. Many meditators find these supports to work very well.

- In all of these positions, you should establish a naturally straight back. To begin with, use your back muscles and straighten your back. You can likely hold this artificially straight position for a few minutes, but eventually, your back muscles will start aching. Therefore, you need to find a way to let your spine, not your muscles, do the work.

- This course recommends that you leave the back straight and bend forward from the hips until your buttocks starts to lift off the zafu, bench, or chair. Then, rock back slowly onto the zafu, bench, or chair, releasing all of the tension in your back as you return to an upright position. Try this technique a few times, and you should find that it allows your back to remain straight with a slight arch in your lower back, while also allowing you to relax your back muscles. Relax all of the muscles in your shoulders and back and let your spine do the work of holding you upright.

- Hold your left thumb with your right hand. Then, clasp your right hand gently with the fingers of your left hand. Rest your clasped hands in your lap, snuggly tucked up against your lower belly.

- The next thing to attend to is the head. It is best to slightly tuck your chin in when you meditate. Alternatively, pull a tuft of hair on the crown of your head upward toward the ceiling. This sets the head in proper alignment with the spine. Make sure the head is not tilted either to the left or to the right and that it's not bending forward or back. Your ears should be over your shoulders, and the tip of your nose should be over your belly button.

- In Zen meditation, one leaves the eyes open, though you can lower the eyelids halfway. If you are sitting on the floor, let your vision naturally settle on a spot on the floor about four or five feet in front of you. Let your vision settle six or seven feet in front of you if you are sitting on a chair. Be sure that the spot is right in the middle; otherwise, over time, it will cause your body to lean left or right.

Attending to the Breath

- The breath is the great mediator of the mental and material aspects of the psychosomatic self and of the inner and outer dimensions of self and world. By meditating on the breath, you will discover that it conjoins and pervades the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of yourself. Deep breathing with the lower abdomen calms the emotions and clarifies the mind.

- By meditating on the breath, you will discover that it is a respirational exchange of inside and outside. If you attend to the breath, it will be a constant reminder that you are not an isolated individual but are intimately connected with the world around you. Breathing in, you inhale the world; breathing out, you exhale the self.

Attending to the Mind

- As a beginner in meditation, you should simply focus your mind on the breath. A relevant technique here is counting the breaths. Called *sūsokkan* in Japanese, the method of counting the breaths has for centuries been a basic practice of Zen meditation, and it is the practice this course recommends you start with. It is also a practice you can always return to. Here's how you do it:

  1. After you are physically situated, take a deep breath and then forcefully exhale all of the stale air out of every crevice inside you. You can repeat this preparatory step two or three times if you wish.

  2. Then, with your mouth closed and your tongue pressed gently against the back of your upper front teeth, relax all of the muscles of your lower abdomen and let yourself naturally breathe in deeply.

  3. Next, breathe out more slowly through the nostrils until you have exhausted all the air.

  4. Then, let your body naturally turn from exhalation back to inhalation. It is important to breathe naturally. As you relax your lower abdomen and mindfully attend to the breath, it will naturally deepen of its own accord. Eventually, the breath may become at times very subtle and even shallow. Let it do what feels natural.

5. When you're ready, begin counting one number per breath. While exhaling, silently count one number for the duration of the outbreath. Keep this up until you have counted to 10 with 10 breaths. Then, simply begin again with one. When your mind wanders and you lose track of which number you are on, gently yet firmly bring yourself back to the practice and begin again at one.

SUGGESTED READING

Buksbazen, *Zen Meditation in Plain English*.

Loori, *Finding the Still Point*.

Maezumi and Glassman, *On Zen Practice*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How should the body be positioned when meditating?

2 What should one do with the mind when meditating?

THE MIDDLE WAY OF KNOWING WHAT SUFFICES

LESSON 5

It is impossible to understand Zen Buddhism without learning something about the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha always geared his teachings to whomever he was addressing at the time. Following his example, this lesson provides explanations of basic Buddhist teachings geared toward an audience of 21st-century Westerners interested in learning about Zen Buddhism and possibly in applying its teachings and practices to their lives.

The Middle Way

- The very first lesson the Buddha taught was the Middle Way between indulging and repressing sense desires. To understand the Middle Way, it is necessary to understand how the Buddha arrived at this insight through many years of his own experiences and experiments with both extremes of hedonism and asceticism.

- The person who became the historical Buddha was Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in the 6th century BCE around today's border between India and Nepal. Commonly accepted dates for his life are 563–483 BCE.

- His father was the ruler of a small kingdom, and he wanted to make sure that his son took the political rather than the spiritual path. For that reason, he kept him sheltered and shielded from all the miseries of life.

- Up until the age of 29, Siddhartha lived a life of extreme privilege and luxury. He was not exposed to any of the suffering caused by even such unavoidable matters as old age, sickness, and death.

- However, on three unannounced excursions, Siddhartha witnessed three sights. On the first excursion, he saw a very old man, hunched over and barely able to walk. On the second excursion, he saw a very sick person whose flesh was covered with open sores. And on the third excursion, he saw a corpse being carried on a berth in a funeral procession.

- Siddhartha was profoundly disturbed by the sights of old age, illness, and death that he witnessed on his excursions outside his pleasure palace. In each case, he asked his attendant if these things would happen to him. In each case the answer was: Yes, they will eventually happen to you.

- The young Siddhartha returned to his palace, but he could no longer enjoy its pleasures, knowing what he now did about life's inevitable sufferings. Yet Siddhartha was not destined to become a pessimist. This was foretold by a fourth sight he had on yet another excursion he took outside the palace walls. He saw a renouncer—that is, a wandering mendicant. This was a spiritual seeker who, from the peaceful smile on his face, seemed to have already found something. This fourth sight inspired Siddhartha to leave home in search of a way beyond suffering—not just for himself, but for everyone.

- Leaving home required some great sacrifices. Prince Siddhartha gave up his social standing and all his possessions; he left the pleasures and protections he enjoyed behind his palace walls. In an even more demanding sacrifice, he left his family, including his wife, his son, and his aunt, who raised him. Eventually, he did come back for them, and they joined his sangha, his community of practitioners. In the meantime, it must have been very hard on all of them.

Liberating All Sentient Beings from Suffering

- Siddhartha wanted to find a path beyond suffering so that he could show it to others. He wanted to wake up, to become a Buddha, so that he could wake others up. Even before leaving home, Siddhartha became keenly aware of the suffering of his fathers' servants, who toiled under harsh conditions in the fields. He freed them at once. He also released the oxen from their harnesses.

- Incidentally, Buddhists are concerned with the liberation from suffering of all sentient beings—that is, all beings who can feel, not just humans. Although the Buddha did not teach absolute vegetarianism, he did prohibit his followers from killing animals.

- Physical freedom from external constraints is by no means a guarantee of spiritual freedom from internal bondage. In fact, people who are free to do whatever they want can end up just becoming a slave to their wants. We must attain internal as well as external freedom, and that requires spiritual discipline.

Different Desires

- Most of our activities are motivated by the pursuit of one or the other of pleasure, profit, power, and prestige. We all want these, and in fact, we all need a certain amount of all four to be happy. But this raises some questions: Are they all we need? Do they deserve all of our attention and energies?

- In Hinduism, four legitimate aims of life are recognized. The first two are pleasure and wealth. The third is moral duty. Yet pleasure, wealth, and duty are not enough. Especially in our evening years, says the Hindu tradition, we should increasingly turn our attention to the ultimate aim of life: spiritual liberation. This is called moksha in Hinduism. Buddhism sometimes uses that term, but in general calls it nirvana.

- The Hindu doctrine of the four life aims is helpful insofar as it recognizes that we have different kinds of desires and that they are all natural and legitimate—as long as they are kept within their proper bounds and measure. There is nothing wrong with a moderate pursuit of pleasure and wealth as long as this pursuit does not overshadow and override the higher aims of morality and spirituality.

- The Buddha spoke of the four immeasurables, or boundless attitudes, of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These are called immeasurables because we can never have an excess of them. On the other hand, there are some unwholesome desires that should be utterly abandoned. Hatred, jealousy, the desire to hurt others, and so forth, fall into this category.

- Many desires, however, belong to a third category: those that we should learn to have the right amount of. These include, for example, desires for food, sleep, and sex. There is nothing wrong with the desire for food when the body needs nutrients. But an excessive desire for food is unhealthy.

- An excessive, inordinate desire is called a craving. And it is craving, not desire as such, that the Buddha says is the cause of suffering. Altruistic desires are to be engendered, and egoistic cravings are to be eliminated. But the third category of desires, desires that are proper in the right amount, is the trickiest. This is where the Buddha's first teaching of the Middle Way comes into play.

Experimenting with Extremes

- On his way to becoming the Buddha, Siddhartha personally experimented with both extremes of indulging and quashing desires. Growing up in an overprotective pleasure palace, Siddhartha lived the life of hedonism. Later, during his pre-enlightenment period of extreme asceticism, Siddhartha nearly starved himself to death.

- Images of Siddhartha after he became the Buddha generally depict him with a healthy body mass index. Images of the Chinese Zen figure Budai, the so-called happy Buddha or laughing Buddha, seem to go too far in the opposite direction. The symbolic point of this plump figure is to counteract images of Buddhism as world-negating and aloof from society.

- In certain matters, it can be difficult to know when to stop—to know when one has had enough. Extremes are easier to pursue: either more is better, or less is more. Examples include strict abstinence versus sex addiction or being a workaholic versus living a life of leisure. The world seems to be constantly offering us such binary choices between extremes. The Buddha says that we need to learn to say no to both extremes and to find the right balance between them.

The Middle Way Pendulum between Extremes

- The Buddha is not alone in advocating a Middle Way. In ancient Greece and medieval Christianity, one of the cardinal virtues was moderation.

- The tendency to excess, including the spiritual arrogance that the Greeks called hubris, is related to a lack of self-knowledge. Only if one knows one's limits can one know how much is enough and how much is excessive.

- We seem to have lost a sense of this virtue of moderation. Admittedly, teaching temperance won't be the best stimulus for a capitalist economy—an economy which thrives not just on satisfying desires but moreover on creating cravings. But reviving this teaching of temperance is nevertheless necessary for us to cultivate a more balanced lifestyle.

- It is not by deleting all desires any more than it is by multiplying them that we can find balance in our lives. Kobayashi Rōshi—who, as of this course's taping, is the abbot of Shōkokuji monastery in Kyoto—has compared the Middle Way to riding a bicycle. It is only by pushing down just the right amount and with just the right rhythmic timing on the left and right pedals that we can maintain our balance and move forward down the road.

- It can be helpful to think of the Middle Way as a passageway—an opening that leads beyond our life of swinging between extremes on the hedonism-asceticism pendulum. Only if we find this passageway, the Buddha taught, can we pass from samsara, the state of suffering, to nirvana, the state of peace and true happiness. If we try to get there by steering too far in the direction of either hedonism or asceticism, we will hit a wall and won't be able to pass through this opening in the middle.

SUGGESTED READING

Heisig, "Sufficiency and Satisfaction in Zen Buddhism."

Loy, *The Great Awakening*, chapters 2–4.

Kohn, "The Life of the Buddha."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why did the Buddha reject both extreme hedonism and extreme asceticism?

2 How does the Buddha's Middle Way teach us to be satisfied with what suffices?

Meditation Checkup:
The Middle Way of Meditation

The conclusion of Lesson 5 is a meditation checkup focused on the Middle Way. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following tips serve as a summary of the checkup.

Bodily Posture

- Meditation involves finding a physically balanced posture. After you get situated on your cushion or chair, you can fine-tune your posture by letting gravity help center you, such that you are sitting perfectly perpendicular to the floor.

- To do this, while leaving your back straight, very gently initiate a rocking movement forward and backward. As soon as you have initiated the movement, let go, release control, and witness how gravity and your body harmoniously work together as the rocking movement decreases little by little, coming to rest at a perfectly balanced point. Next, repeat this process by initiating a side-to-side rocking movement.

- Once you come to a balanced still point, notice how this subtle fine-tuning of your bodily posture affects your mental poise. You might even feel as if all the forces in the universe are cooperating to allow you to sit in this relaxed yet upright posture, as if everything is literally conspiring with you as you begin your meditation on the breath.

The Cosmic Mudra

- An excellent way to stay attuned to the balance of the Middle Way during meditation is to hold your hands in a special position called the cosmic mudra. Place your right hand on your lap, palm facing upward. Then, place your left hand on your right hand, also with the palm facing upward. Finally, touch your two thumbs together so that your hands form a circle.

- While you meditate with your hands in this position, you'll find that when you are tense, your thumbs press together and point upward. When you are distracted, your thumbs drift apart. And when you are drowsy, your thumbs droop downward. However, when you manage to maintain a relaxed alertness, a concentrated mindfulness, your thumbs remain gently touching, effortlessly keeping the form of the cosmic mudra.

Dealing with Agitation and Lethargy

- As your meditation practice progresses, you'll find that your mind is tranquil but alert—zoned in rather than zoned out. If your mind is agitated or if you are sleepy, it is difficult to meditate. Sometimes, you may just need to lay down and take a nap. Other times, you may need to get up and deal with a problem that is bothering you. Then, sit down to meditate when you are, relatively speaking, less drowsy or preoccupied.

- Inevitably, however, at least mild forms of agitation and lethargy will beset you at times while you are meditating. Don't get frustrated. Rather, take these problems as reminders of why you need to meditate; take them as encouragements to devote yourself to a more regular practice of meditation. Most of all, bear in mind that dealing with a racing mind or drooping eyelids is not just preparation for meditation; it is part and parcel of the practice itself.

- In practicing meditation, you are negotiating the Middle Way. Sometimes, you will feel like you can't sit still; other times, you will feel like you can't stay awake. Yet you will find that the more you sit, the sitting corrects these tendencies and naturally brings you back onto the Middle Way.

- It is helpful to focus on and count your breaths. If you are sleepy, you can experience the in-breath as enlivening—filling you with all the energy of the universe. On the out-breath, you can muster your spiritual energy and silently bellow out each number, as if you were refilling the whole world with the vitality of that breath.

- On the other hand, if you are agitated, you can experience the breath as mentally calming and emotionally soothing. Relax into each out-breath, extending the number with an attitude of infinite patience, letting go of all the tension in your face, jaw, neck, shoulders, and back. Let the in-breath happen without any effort; just relax the muscles in your lower abdomen and let the smooth air fill you with calm.

- In these ways, you can counterbalance whichever extreme you are tilting toward by concentrating on the breath. While meditating, let the breath lead you down the path of the Middle Way. You'll also find that, at other times—since whatever else you are doing, you must also be breathing—the breath will be there to help keep you balanced.

EMBRACING THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIFE

LESSON 6

In his first sermon, after he taught the Middle Way, the Buddha explained for the first time the doctrine that became the framework for his other teachings: the Four Noble Truths. The gist of these can be paraphrased as follows:

1. Human beings suffer, especially from a deep-rooted spiritual or existential unease.
2. This suffering is caused by craving and ignorance.
3. It is possible to put an end to these causes of suffering and thus to attain the ultimate peace of nirvana.
4. The way to do this is to follow the Eightfold Path of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

This lesson focuses especially on the first two Noble Truths.

Overview of the Problem and Cure

- The first truth is that our lives are pervaded by *duhkha*. The term is often translated as "suffering," but it is better rendered as "discontentment" or "unease." It is the existential unease that we feel in the pit of our stomach when we are not being dishonest with or distracting ourselves.

- The first truth is an intervention—a moment of tough love asking us to face up to the problem. Our resistance to admitting that deep down we are discontent is the first barrier on the path to peace.

- The opposite of duhkha is *sukha*, happiness. The job of Buddhas, and of bodhisattvas who aspire to become Buddhas, is to remove suffering and add happiness. But what is true happiness? All of us can list times in which we feel more or less happy. On closer inspection, we may realize that our moments of happiness are all too momentary.

- Even the longer periods of happiness we experience are usually at least tinged with the worry that they won't last very long. Perhaps this is why we seek more intense feelings of pleasure or semiconscious states of inebriation in our attempts to cover over this underlying unease.

- With the third truth, the Buddha promises a cure, not just a distraction. And with the fourth truth, he prescribes moral living and mindful meditation rather than time-killing diversions.

A Mismatch between Desire and Reality

- Suffering is caused by the fact that our desires don't match reality. For example, a little boy craves an ice cream, but he doesn't have an ice cream, and so he cries. Another example: A young man wants more than anything to be a millionaire, but he only has $200, so he is miserable. The formula for suffering is always a mismatch between desire and reality. If our desire does not match up with reality, we suffer.

- This means that there are two possible strategies for overcoming suffering: We must either change reality to satisfy our desire or change our desire so that it matches reality. In any case, the crucial question is: Which desires should we try to satisfy, and which desires should we work on letting go of?

Change Reality or Change Our Minds?

- A few more examples may be helpful. Imagine that you are a teenager, and your dream is to become a professional basketball player. You may think that, even though your ball skills are not yet good enough, you are willing to work twice as hard as your peers, so that in the end, you can fulfill your dream. Yet at some point along the way, you may realize that no matter how hard you train, you won't be able to compete at that level.

- At that point, you can either wallow in self-pity or rethink your dream, perhaps aiming to become a coach rather than a player. This discernment and flexibility may allow you to modify your desires in a way that leads you to your true calling—and maybe even to a greater happiness than you had imagined.

- Now for a weightier example: Imagine that you are gravely ill. If there is a treatment that can cure your illness, then you would be foolish not to undergo it, even, perhaps, if it involves serious side effects and a prolonged hospital stay.

- On the other hand, if you are terminally ill and there is simply no way to treat your illness, then accepting this fact and perhaps moving from a hospital back home or to a hospice, where you can better enjoy your last days while you psychologically and spiritually prepare for death, may be the better option.

- Here is a different kind of example: A group of people go for a picnic in the woods for the first time. They have decided they are going to do this for lunch every day from now on.

- They are ready to sit down, but then they notice there are no chairs. They have a choice: They can work to change their environment or work to adapt themselves to the environment. In this case, they can cut down some trees and build chairs to sit on, or they can train their bodies to be comfortable sitting on the ground, perhaps in a kneeling or a cross-legged position.

- Many people raised in a Western or Westernized culture have encountered chairs everywhere they go: offices, schools, airports, and restaurants. Even when camping, folding chairs are often present. As a result, people in such a culture tend to have rather stiff bodies that cannot comfortably sit on the ground.

- Traditional Japanese culture, by contrast, took the other route. They adapted their bodies to the environment, keeping them flexible such that they are comfortable sitting down on a relatively flat surface anywhere. Recently, however, as more Japanese people sit in chairs more frequently, they too have started to have stiffer bodies.

- This lesson's purpose is not to downplay the benefits of changing the world to fit our wants, much less our needs. However, there are downsides as well as upsides to this approach, and, we should sometimes think about adapting ourselves to reality rather than trying to change it to fit our desires. This other way of dealing with the mismatch between our desires and reality is especially recommended when some stubborn fact of reality simply cannot be changed, no matter how hard we try.

From Suffering Change to Embracing It

- The Buddha was most concerned with deep kinds of psychological and spiritual duhkha. The first of these deeper levels of duhkha is the fact that we suffer change. We recoil at the thought that everything is impermanent. Even our times of joy are tinged with an anxious awareness that they, too, will pass.

- However, even if we could prolong many of the events that make us happy, would we really want to? For instance, even the joyous embrace of a returning loved one in an airport would get old and awkward if it went on too long.

- The desire to be permanent, to be rid of impermanence, is a desire that should be let go of. It is not realistic, and when we really think about it, permanence is not desirable. We should accept impermanence. Indeed, the more we can embrace it and affirm it, the happier we will be. Experiences are desirable not despite but rather because they are impermanent.

- Japanese culture is especially attuned to the beauty as well as to the sorrows of impermanence. The cherry blossoms burst into bloom, and then just a few days later, fall to the ground. Their impermanence intensifies—rather than detracts from—their poignant beauty.

- The entire nation eagerly waits for them to come into bloom. When they do, hundreds of thousands of people of all ages drop what they are doing to go sit under the cherry trees, sing songs, and soak in their ephemeral charm. Even businesses send young employees out in the morning to stake out prime spots under the trees.

- The blossoms are thought to be most beautiful as they fall to the ground, fluttering in the wind and singing the swan song of their short lives. Similarly, although we experience all of the night sky's flickering stars as beautiful, it is more precious, we feel, to catch a rare glimpse of a shooting star.

Impermanence Is Buddha Nature

- Some early Buddhist texts suggest that we need to transcend samsara, the world of impermanence, to attain nirvana. The Zen tradition, however, teaches that we need to embrace the here and now of life in this world, learning to let go of the

desire to leave this world behind. The 13th-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen tells us that nirvana is to be found in the midst of the birth-and-death world of samsara. The Buddha-nature is not some timeless realm beyond this one, but rather, Dōgen writes, quoting the 8th-century Chinese Zen master Huineng, "impermanence is in itself the Buddha-nature."

- As long as we crave permanence, it is difficult for us to appreciate this world of impermanence. We cannot change the impermanence of our lives. We can, however, wish it were otherwise or hope for an afterlife in which it will be different.

- The Buddha did not try to force anyone to believe anything they didn't want to believe. Indeed, he accepted the common belief in life after death, which in his society meant reincarnation in an earthly, heavenly, ghostly, or hellish domain.

- Since it is one's karma—one's volitional thoughts and actions—that determine one's reincarnation, the Buddha in effect suggested that we can live as long as we want. This is because it is the wanting, the craving for continuance, that assures that we will be reborn in this world or elsewhere.

SUGGESTED READING

Loy, *Lack and Transcendence*.

Stambaugh, *Impermanence Is Buddha-Nature*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are the root causes of spiritual suffering, and how did the Buddha present himself as a "spiritual doctor" who could diagnose and offer a prescription for it?
- Why does the Buddha say that we need to embrace change rather than wish for permanence?

THE

TRUE SELF IS EGOLESS

LESSON 7

This lesson and the two after it deal with the philosophical core of Zen Buddhism. They may challenge you emotionally as well as intellectually. If you find something difficult to understand or to accept, you can always move on and perhaps circle back to it later.

We Crave to Be What We Are Not

- The deepest source of duhkha is the fact that we are not at ease with being the kind of beings we in truth are. We suffer from a subtle awareness that we are not the kind of beings we deeply crave to be. In a nutshell, we crave to be permanent and independent, and yet we constantly bump up against the fact that we are impermanent and interdependent.

- Recall the formula for suffering: Suffering is caused by the gap between our desires and reality—that is, it is caused by a mismatch between the way we want things to be and the way things in reality are. Here is a simple three-step logical explanation of how our attachment to the idea of an independent and unchanging ego causes us to suffer:

  1. We crave to be permanent and independent beings.

  2. The reality is that we are impermanent and interdependent beings.

  3. Therefore, we suffer from an existential dis-ease.

- Our craving for permanence and independence is based on an ignorance of the way things are. Insofar as we crave to believe that we are the kind of selves that we are not and cannot be, this ignorance is, in turn, based on craving.

- Our existential unease is thus caused by a ferocious feedback loop between craving and ignorance. Our dis-ease is rooted in a willful ignorance. This is the Buddha's Second Noble Truth.

- The gospel, the good news of the Buddha's teaching, is given in the Third Noble Truth: By abandoning craving—by eliminating ignorance—we can become enlightened and overcome the existential unease that plagues us. We can attain the peace of nirvana.

The Path to Peace

- In samsara—in living a life based on ignorance and craving—our minds are not at peace. Zen Buddhism teaches that the reason we are not at peace with ourselves is because we have never looked all the way into our own minds.

- In causing ourselves to suffer, we cause others to suffer, and vice versa. Because we do not understand ourselves, we do not understand our relations to others. We crave to control others and the world around us because we do not understand who we are and how we are related to others and to the world.

- Buddhism seeks to cut this tangle of ignorance, craving, and suffering by dispelling the illusion of a permanent and separate ego and revealing the true nature of the self. Whereas other Buddhist traditions take a more gradual and analytical approach to the question of the self, Zen kōans attempt to cut the knot in one fell swoop with the sword of insight.

- Zen meditation halls usually feature a statue of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, who is depicted wielding the sword of insight. That sword cuts through the delusions of duality, the illusory sense of being separated from others and from the world.

The Anatman Doctrine

- The most challenging teaching of the Buddha is the anatman doctrine. The first issue is the question of how to best translate this term. Should we translate the term *anatman* as "egolessness," as "selflessness," as "no-self," as "no-ego," or as "no-soul"?

- These very different possible translations reveal that the true challenge is understanding what is meant by this doctrine. Each one of these translations carries different nuances and evokes different reactions in us. For example, to Christians, a teaching of egolessness or selflessness sounds very familiar and commendable. But a doctrine of no-soul sounds like a direct challenge to one of their core beliefs.

- The Theravada Buddhist monk and scholar Walpola Rahula, in his landmark and still widely read book *What the Buddha Taught*, deliberately translates the term *anatman* as "no-soul" to assert that there is a fundamental difference between Buddhism and religions such as Christianity. He says that, just as humans have invented the idea of God as a celestial father out of a desire for self-protection, they have invented the idea of an eternal soul or atman out of a desire for self-preservation.

- However, some Christians, such as the Catholic priest and renowned scholar of Zen Buddhism Heinrich Dumoulin, have found there to be significant similarities between Buddhist and Christian ideas about the self. Responding directly to Rahula's interpretation of the anatman doctrine, Dumoulin writes: "This denial of the individual self seems to put Buddhism in clear opposition to Christianity. However, when we look more closely at what is meant by non-self, this opposition is softened."

- Dumoulin reminds us that "the distinction between empirical ego and true self is also found in Christian religious experience. One of Christ's central teachings is that one must "lose one's life in order to win it."

The Buddha's Silence

- Even in the Pali canon, the early collection of sutras and other texts that are the basis of the Theravada tradition, the Buddha did not, in fact, unequivocally deny the existence of the self or atman. In a famous encounter with a recluse named Vacchagotta, he remained silent both when asked if there was a self and if there was not.

- Evidently, the Buddha thought that Vacchagotta would have been misled by answering either yes or no to the question of whether the self exists. Either way, regardless of whether he was told it exists or does not exist, Vacchagotta's mistaken conception of the self would have been confirmed.

- The Buddha's silence in response to Vacchagotta's questions is pregnant with the teaching of what could be called the ontological Middle Way. It is analogous to the practical

Middle Way that steers a course between the extremes of hedonism and asceticism. The ontological Middle Way steers a course between the extreme views of substantialism or eternalism on the one hand and the opposite extreme views of nihilism or annihilationism on the other.

- Ontology is an account of what there is in reality. For the Buddha, what exists is neither a world of separate and eternal substances nor a vacuous black hole of nothingness. What exist are interconnected processes.

- The Buddha taught that what exists is not nothing, but neither is it something, if by something we mean independent entities like the ancient Greek notion of atoms. Although modern physicists still speak of atoms, for etymological reasons, they should have renamed the atom after they discovered it could be split because the term *atom* refers to what cannot be divided.

THINKING WITHOUT A THINKER

The 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes famously said, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes tried to doubt everything to find something that he absolutely could not doubt—a solid foundation of certainty. With this phrase, he believed he found something indubitable. But the question remains: Did he? As the American pragmatist philosopher William James later said, when we introspect, we don't in fact find a thinker but rather only a process of thinking. Descartes should have said that we can be certain that "thinking is going on" rather than that "I think."

- What physicists now say exists is a dynamic quantum field of interchangeable mass and energy—a field of interconnected processes rather than independent atoms. Not unlike modern quantum physics, the Buddha said that things come about and pass away in processes of "interdependent origination"—a translation of the key Sanskrit phrase *pratitya-samutpada*.

- In philosophical terms, both contemporary physicists and ancient Buddhists understand reality in terms of a process ontology rather than a substance ontology. The self, too, is a process. It is a process interlinked with all the other processes in the universe, including, of course, with other "process selves."

The Life-Stream of the Self

- The Buddha refers to the Five Aggregates, which make up the life-stream of the self: bodily forms, sensations and feelings, perceptions and thoughts, dispositions and volitions, and consciousness of all of the other aggregates. These are all interconnected processes, not separate substances.

- They are always changing. Our trains of thoughts and fleeting feelings are changing much faster even than our bodies are growing, regenerating, and aging. And all these moving parts of the self are interconnected with the Five Aggregates of other life-streams.

- The 2nd-century BCE Buddhist philosopher Nāgasena explained the anatman doctrine to a Greek king using the analogy of a chariot. When we analyze it, we realize that a chariot is nothing but an amalgamation—an aggregate of wheels, axles, floorboard, and other parts. It is the same with the self, he said.

- Biologists tell us that our cells live for no more than a few days to about seven years; the building blocks of our bodies are constantly dying off and being replaced. The only cells that live much longer are neurons, but a physicist would tell us that even neurons are made up of constantly changing subatomic particles flashing in and out of existence in a field of interconnected mass and energy.

- There is not a self in the sense of an independent and permanent substance. But there is one in the sense of the self-reproducing and shifting pattern of a stream of interconnected processes. The problem is that we misunderstand the process-self as a substance-self. This is the problem of what the Buddha calls grasping, clinging, or attachment.

- It is a problem rooted in the feedback loop between ignorance and craving; it is a problem of willful ignorance. We might say that we want to know ourselves. But in reality, we crave to maintain our ignorance—including an ignorance of this craving that is keeping us in the dark.

- The true self is the self that has shed light on itself by cutting the tangle of ignorance and craving. Mahayana Buddhist traditions, and especially Zen, suggest, in particular, that the true self can be characterized as "ungraspable" and as "interconnected."

The True Self Is Ungraspable

- The 9th-century Chinese Zen master Linji famously speaks of "the true person of no rank who is always going in and out of the face of every one of you." Who you really are is not your status in a company or in society; it cannot be reduced to the ranks you hold or the roles you play. Indeed, it cannot be objectified in any way whatsoever.

- The root problem is not just that we are looking for the self in all the wrong places. It is that we are looking for it at all, as if it were some thing, some golden golf ball, so to speak, hidden in some crevice of our brain or in some artery of our hearts.

SUGGESTED READING

Abe, "The Self in Jung and Zen."

Dumoulin, *Understanding Buddhism*, chapter 2.

Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, chapter 6.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is the anatman doctrine of Buddhism?

2 How does Zen understand the teaching of no-self to be compatible with the teaching of the true self?

Meditation Checkup:
Lead with the Body and Physical Stillness

The conclusion of Lesson 7 is a meditation checkup focused on the body and stillness. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following tips serve as a summary of the checkup.

Leading with the Body

- It is very helpful to lead with the body. You cannot completely control the body, but you at least have more control over the body than you do over the mind. With some success, you can order the body to be still, but if you try to order the mind to be still, that usually just riles it up all the more.

- Even if we can sometimes get our minds to be relatively still for a few minutes, this does not straightaway pacify our turbulent emotions. When the mind stops racing for a minute or two, we might realize that, underneath the thinking mind, the emotional heart is anxious and unsettled. Through a prolonged practice of meditation, our emotions become calmer and brighter. Even then, however, the deepest dimension of ourselves—the spirit—is not yet fully at peace.

- In a practice of meditation, we can best attain stillness and peace in this order: first the body, then the mind, then the heart, and finally the spirit. Lead with the body—with physical stillness. That may take a considerable amount of effort and commitment, but you can do it.

- Then, attending to the breath, trust in the process. Let the breath be the bridge that it is; let it circulate like a fluid connecting tissue between the different physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of your being.

- As you attend to the breath, your physical stillness will create the condition for your mind to eventually calm down. Mental stillness, in turn, will allow the emotions to slowly settle and relax. Then, gradually—or perhaps even suddenly—you will one day attain the spiritual peace you deeply desire. This will happen at least periodically, and maybe someday more or less continually.

Committing to Leading with the Body

- Leading with the body includes committing to physical stillness for the duration of each sitting. If you have a problem like a severe leg cramp, by all means, move. But otherwise, it is important to commit to refraining from all voluntary movements during a sitting.

- Involuntary movements, like sneezing, are fine. Let them come and let them go, like anything else beyond your control. You'll find that they don't truly disturb you or other meditators around you.

- Voluntary movements, though, are distracting, and they can easily become addictive. Once you start to adjust your posture or scratch an itch, it easily becomes a habitual fidgeting. Like opening a big bag of potato chips, it's hard to know when to stop or how many seconds to wait before going for another.

- If you are allowed to move whenever you want, you may be externally free, but not internally. You will be at the mercy of urges your body throws at you to fidget, scratch, adjust, or otherwise move about and remain unsettled.

LOVING OTHERS AS YOURSELF

LESSON 8

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is one of the Bible's main teachings. It first appears in Leviticus and is repeated throughout the New Testament. In Leviticus, God commands his people to love immigrants as well as fellow Jews. Jesus goes even further, telling us to love our enemies:

> You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Some have seen this call to "love your enemies" as Jesus's most innovative as well as most radical teaching. Yet scholars have pointed out both biblical and non-biblical precedents. Five centuries earlier the Buddha taught boundless compassion and loving-kindness. In the Metta Sutta, we read:

> As a mother watches over her child, willing to risk her own life to protect her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, suffusing the whole world with unobstructed loving-kindness.

Based on such teachings of the Buddha, in the tonglen method of Tibetan Buddhist meditation, one cultivates compassion and loving-kindness, beginning with one's mother and gradually extending to even those whom one considers to be one's enemies.

What Did Jesus Mean?

- Like the ethical teaching of the Golden Rule, the spiritual teaching of overcoming the separation between self and other is not unique to the Buddha and Jesus. Five centuries before Jesus, around the same time as the Buddha lived in India, Confucius taught a version of the Golden Rule in China.

- A millennium after Buddhism was brought to China, the 11th-century neo-Confucian philosopher Cheng Hao wrote: "Benevolent people regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body. Nothing is not oneself. If you recognize something as yourself, there are no limits to how far [your compassion] will go."

- The neo-Confucians adopted the notion of being "of one body" with heaven, earth, and all beings from Zen. And Zen can be said to have gotten the idea in part from the foundational Daoist text, the Zhuangzi, which contains the following lines: "Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one."

- This idea was introduced into Chinese Buddhist thought in the 4th century by Sengzhao, an early Chinese Buddhist philosopher who interpreted Mahayana Buddhist thought in Daoist terms, effectively laying the groundwork for the development of the Zen tradition. He wrote: "Heaven and Earth and I share the same root. The myriad things and I are of the same body."

Tat Tvam Asi: You Are Your Neighbor

- In India, the stress on the underlying oneness of all life is found not only in Mahayana Buddhism but also in many ancient texts of Hinduism. One of the first Western scholars to learn Sanskrit and study the ancient texts of Hinduism was Paul Deussen.

- Upon reading the Upanishads, the recorded teachings of the ancient Hindu sages, Deussen wrote that the Upanishads contain the "formula" of *tat tvam asi*, which "gives in three words metaphysics and morals together." The term *tat tvam asi* means "that art thou," or "you are that."

- The word *that* in this usage indicates brahman, the divine source and unity of all things and all people. Deussen reasoned that tat tvam asi gives the answer to the question of why you should love your neighbor. You should do so because "you are your neighbor."

A Refrain

- Tat tvam asi is a refrain in the lessons the sage Uddalaka gives to his son Shvetaketu in the Chandogya Upanishad. Uddalaka uses a number of analogies to get his son to awaken to the divine oneness underlying all the differences in the world. For example, he points out the fact that all the different vessels and figures made out of clay differ only in "name and form," but at bottom they consist of the same substance.

- Uddalaka does not deny that people and things really do differ in name and form. His point is that, on a deeper level, there is an underlying unity of the universe. It is not enough to see, like a scientist, that all objects are made up of the same interchangeable flux of mass and energy.

- The truly enlightening moment comes when we realize the unity of the seer with all that it sees, the unity of subject and object, the unity of the self and the divine ground of reality—in Hindu terms, the unity of atman and brahman. (The term *atman* is the word meaning "self" that the Uddalaka uses.)

Tasting the Oneness of All Life

- In one of Uddalaka's lessons, he tells his son to get a wide pail of water and to put a lump of salt in it. The next day, after it has dissolved into the water, Uddalaka asks his son if he can see the salt. His son says no. He then asks him to taste the water, and of course he can taste the salt.

- Crucially, Uddalaka asks his son to taste it not just in one place, but in several different places in the pail. It is the same taste everywhere. Relevantly, Zen masters talk about the "one taste" of reality and of drinking the water and knowing for oneself whether it is hot or cold. We cannot see the salt of life. We cannot tell whether the water is hot or cold by just looking at it. We have to taste it for ourselves.

- Only when we have managed to taste the oneness of all life can we begin to also *see* it in the midst of all of our myriad differences. Only then, says Uddalaka, have we attained that spiritual wisdom in which "we come to know that all of life is one."

- Notably, the Buddha taught the anatman doctrine. As in English, in Indian languages such as Sanskrit and Pali, the prefixes *a-* and *an-* express a privation or negation. Therefore, for centuries, monks and scholars have tended to distinguish Buddhism from Hinduism (or Brahmanism) by contrasting the Buddhist anatman doctrine with the Hindu atman metaphysics.

- However, the matter is far from this simple. To begin with, there were and are many different Hindu schools of philosophy and religion, often with very different understandings of what atman signifies.

- The Buddha was most concerned with refuting the notion of an atman understood as an unchanging and independently existing soul-entity. Yet Uddalaka is talking about the self that unites rather than separates us from others. Although Uddalaka's stress on oneness may not allow for the complementary stress on difference we find in Zen, we should recognize a real kinship between his teaching and at least an important aspect of Zen.

- Some passages that are clearly reminiscent of Uddalaka's teaching can be found in *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*, a Zen classic. In the texts appended to the second and third pictures, these passages can be found:

> It is now clear that the many vessels are composed of a single metal, and that the body of the ten thousand things is your self.
>
> Hearing the voice, one gains entry and meets the source wherever one looks. … It is like salt in water, or like glue in paint.

Zen Teachings

- Zen stresses the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of things, persons, and events at least as much and as often as it does the oneness of everything. Zen teachings agree with the band U2's lyrics, "We're one, but we're not the same." Yet what exactly does this mean?

- To begin to answer that crucial question, this lesson turns to a statement by the modern Korean Zen master Kusan Sunim, several parts of which could easily be misunderstood. He says that to awaken is to realize that:

> This world, mankind, and all the animals are no different from oneself. This is precisely the "Great Self." … And as we know that it is not possible to separate any component from the rest of the world, both objects and the relative self cannot really exist. Therefore, the 'Great Self' is precisely 'no-self.'"

- The paradoxical statement that "the 'Great Self' is precisely 'no-self'" is another way of saying that the true self is egoless. In other words, atman, correctly understood, is anatman because the self that is being negated in the anatman doctrine is the self that sees itself as separate from the rest of the universe. The self that awakens to its unity with the rest of the universe is the true self.

- When Kusan Sunim says that "both objects and the relative self cannot really exist," by "really exist," he means exist as independent, self-subsisting entities. As long as we think that this is what it means to "really exist," then nothing really exists. However, we could turn the matter around and say that since no such independently self-subsisting entities exist, this must not be what it means to exist.

To Exist Is to Coexist

- The modern Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says that we need to revise the definition of the most basic verb in the English dictionary: *to be*. We may be enthralled by Hamlet's question of "to be or not to be," but maybe we should question what it means to be in the first place.

- Nhat Hanh's suggestion is that, based not only on Buddhist philosophy but also on modern physics, we should redefine *being* as *interbeing*. "To be is to interbe," he proclaims. In more familiar terms, we could say: To exist is to coexist.

- The term *interbeing* is Nhat Hanh's reformulation of the basic concept of the Buddhist philosophy of interdependent origination. More precisely, *interbeing* is a translation of a Chinese term, *xiang-ji*, which means "mutually to be." In other words, it means that things which may seem to be separate and even opposed to one another in fact mutually belong to one another.

SUGGESTED READING

Easwaran, the Upanishads, 176–200.

Loy, *Nonduality*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What does Zen mean and what does it not mean when it says that we should realize our oneness with everything?

2 Why does Zen suggest that to exist is to coexist?

TAKING TURNS AS THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

LESSON 9

Zen stresses not only the ultimate unity of the universe, but also the irreducible singularity of the different beings and events that make up the universe. Not only is each person, each life-stream, unique, but each moment of each life-stream, and each event of interconnection between life streams, is unique. Everything—every event of interconnection at every moment—is unique. Every event is a unique perspectival expression of the interrelated whole.

Unity in Diversity

- The lesson of multi-perspectival unity in diversity is given most vividly in the example of the jeweled net of Indra found in the Avatamsaka Sutra. The universe is envisioned as a huge net, each knot of which contains a jewel that reflects and is reflected in all the others.

- Dushun, the first patriarch of the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism, a school that greatly influenced Zen, writes: "This imperial net is made all of jewels: because the jewels are clear, they reflect each other's images, appearing in each other's reflections upon reflections, ad infinitum."

- Each nondual event of reality holographically mirrors, in its own finite manner and from its own unique perspective, the infinite universe. It is important to bear in mind that, even if each singular event implies and mirrors the whole universe, it does so in an irreducibly unique and unrepeatable manner.

- The Zen masters in the literature of the tradition are a motley crew of unusually distinct characters. And the records of their encounters are filled with stories of playful competition and serious trickery, all for the sake of spurring one another along toward deeper insights into their oneness and their differences—into their unity in diversity.

The Mutual Exchange of Host and Guest

- The Zen phrase "the mutual exchange of host and guest" was taken up by tea masters who say that the point of the tea ceremony is not just for the tea master to be an excellent host to his or her guests. Rather, the point is to make the guests feel so at home, so much on the same level, that a free exchange of these roles can take place in sharing and conversing over a bowl of tea.

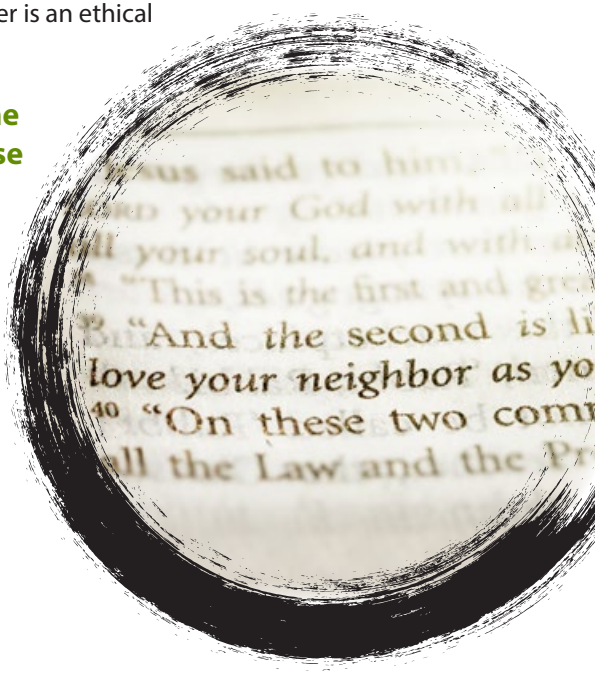
- The philosopher Ueda Shizuteru writes that "the free exchange of the role of host is the very core of dialogue." In a dialogue, sometimes it is proper to speak, while at other times, it is proper to listen. When your conversation partner is either too reticent or too talkative, it's hard to engage in the give-and-take rhythm of a good conversation. Additionally, Ueda writes:

> On the ethical plane, the emphasis, obviously, falls on the moment of self-negation when the role of host or master is surrendered to the other. But this does not mean a one-sided sacrifice of self. At bottom it is a question of reciprocal exchange in "giving priority to the other."

- In other words, in an ethical relation, each person is called on to be other-centered. Only when people are willing to hold the door open for each other is an ethical community possible.

Seeing Another as the Center of the Universe

- A pertinent question is this: What would it mean to truly experience another person as the center of the universe? The Jewish tradition teaches that the best way to love God is by loving our neighbor, as does Christianity.



- A transcendent theism that portrays God as wholly other and above us is common in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, there are also other ways in which theologians and mystics in these traditions have understood and experienced God.

- The Zen understanding of ultimate reality is closer to a panentheistic understanding of God. Panentheism understands all reality to exist within a God who is greater than the sum of God's parts. Panentheism is distinct both from dualistic theism, which maintains the separateness of God and the world, as well as from pantheism, which tends to completely identify God and the world.

- Although Orthodox Christian theologies have tended to favor a more dualistic theism, there are many Christian theologians, mystics, and philosophers—in ancient and modern times—who have understood God in panentheistic terms. One can find a panentheistic conception of God suggested by many passages of the Bible, such as when Paul affirms the idea that "in Him we live and move and have our being."

- A Zen Buddhist might even say that God is the kenotic or self-emptying core of our being; God is our true self. God is the love that is found within our own hearts, beneath the self-centered passions of the ego.

Waves and Water, Mountains and Earth

- The classic Buddhist metaphor for the relation between the universal Buddha-nature that we all share and the mental and physical traits that distinguish us from one another is that of water and waves. The different waves are always moving, intersecting and influencing one another, sometimes clashing and sometimes dancing together.

- At the same time, they are all waves of the same water; they share the same still depths beneath their sometimes beautiful, sometimes violent splashing about on the surface. The water is the waves, yet it also transcends them in their depths.

- To realize oneself as the center of the universe requires, paradoxically, letting go of all self-centeredness. It requires that one recognize that everyone else is also the center of the universe. It requires recognizing that we are each a unique expression of a formless field. As the 15th-century Japanese Zen master Ikkyū says, all things and persons come from and return to the formless "original field" of emptiness.

Being the Center of Attention

- The true dynamic of the self, teaches Ueda, entails two kinds of freedom: freedom from the self and freedom for the self. Both of these are realized in and through genuinely dialogical encounters with others. Ueda uses the Zen ideas of host and guest when he says, "The free exchange of the role of host is the very core of dialogue."

- Genuine dialogue—and indeed the manner of being in any relationship that is genuinely mutual—is a matter of the free exchange of the roles of host and guest. In other words, it is a matter of taking turns being the center of the universe.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, “Encounter in Emptiness.”

Nishitani, “The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Zen stress our individuality and uniqueness at the same time as it stresses our unity or oneness?

2 What does it mean to say that we can take turns being the center of the universe?

Meditation Checkup:
From Mindless Reacting to Mindful Responding

The conclusion of Lesson 9 is a meditation checkup focused on mindfulness. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following tips serve as a summary of the checkup.

Nonjudgmental Awareness

- The key to the practice of mindfulness is the cultivation of nonjudgmental awareness of what's going on in the present moment. According to the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness meditation, after developing a concentrated state of mind by focusing on the sensation of the breath, one dispassionately observes other physical sensations, then feelings, mental states, and finally basic teachings that illuminate our experience of what the self is and what it is not.

- Novice and experienced meditators may on occasion experience rather intense feelings of pain or stiffness in their backs, knees, and other areas of their bodies. Try to patiently and nonjudgmentally attend to such painful sensations without adding excess mental anguish to the physical pain.

- Painful sensations generally cause people to mindlessly react by tensing up physically and mentally, which then leads to a stream of negative thoughts and interpretive evaluations. All of this makes these sensations feel much more painful than they actually are.

- By suspending aversive and judgmental reactions to the painful sensation, you'll likely discover that it is much less alarmingly painful than you had thought. Nonjudgmental awareness will also let you know if and when a physical pain does rise to a level that indicates it needs to be relieved, perhaps by getting up and stretching or by adjusting your sitting position.

Calming Fear and Anxiety

- In practicing mindfulness meditation, you will calm your fearful and anxious emotions. You will prepare yourself, as the Buddha says, to "see things as they are" without prejudice or a predetermined agenda.

- You may never be able to purely see things as they are because people always approach them from a particular standpoint based on context, education, experience, values, and personal interests. But you can at least become more aware of how these factors are conditioning your understanding and thus more attentive to other perspectives and ways of understanding things.

WHO OR WHAT IS THE BUDDHA?

LESSON 10

This course often refers to Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical founder of Buddhism, as the Buddha. However, in Buddhism, and especially in Mahayana Buddhist traditions such as Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, the meaning of the name Buddha is by no means restricted to this historical teacher. This lesson begins to explore the various meanings of Buddha in the various traditions of Buddhism.

Background on the Name

- Buddha is not a proper name but rather an appellation that means "awakened one" or "enlightened one." According to all Buddhist traditions, Shakyamuni was neither the first nor the last Buddha.

- In a Japanese Zen monastery, such as Shōkokuji, the lineage of enlightened teachers is chanted, beginning with six mythical Buddhas who preceded Shakyamuni, then proceeding through the names of the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese lineage, before ending with the previous Zen master of that particular monastery.

- Although one does not typically refer to a living master as a Buddha in the Zen tradition, technically anyone who is fully enlightened is a Buddha. Because all humans are originally endowed with the Buddha-nature, we are all capable of becoming Buddhas. Indeed, that is the whole point of Zen practice—to wake up to our true nature and become a Buddha in this very body.

- However, an individual flesh-and-blood person who is fully awakened to their true nature is not the only understanding of the name Buddha. To awaken to one's Buddha-nature is to awaken to the fact that one's true self is not confined to the flesh, especially if it is misunderstood to be dualistically cut off from the rest of reality.

The Various Traditions of Buddhism

- After Shakyamuni's death, or parinirvana—his ultimate attainment of final nirvana—in the 5th century BCE, his teachings were passed down orally for several centuries. Over time, a schism arose leading to a major split between more conservative groups of Buddhists and more liberal or innovative ones.

- Eventually, around the 1st century BCE, a movement that referred to itself as Mahayana, meaning "Great Vehicle," emerged. Adherents of Mahayana came to derogatorily refer to the more conservative schools as Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle."

- It was thought that whereas adherents of Hinayana aspire only to become arhats—accomplished sages who have liberated themselves from samsara—adherents of Mahayana aspire to be bodhisattvas, or enlightening beings who vow to liberate all sentient beings. Keep in mind that this is the Mahayana version of the difference between itself and the schools it calls Hinayana.

- The so-called Hinayana schools mostly died out, except for the Theravada, or "Doctrine of Elders," school, which still thrives today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and elsewhere. The Mahayana traditions spread to and still thrive today in central and eastern Asia.

- In Tibet and Bhutan, Tantric or Vajrayana schools took root and flourished. In China, Korea, and Japan, Zen and Pure Land Buddhist schools, among others, developed distinct traditions. Theravada and Mahayana schools coexist in Vietnam.

- Along with the arhat versus bodhisattva ideals, another major difference between the so-called Hinayana schools and the Mahayana schools concerns their understandings of the name Buddha.

- A bodhisattva is someone who aspires to become or is well on the way to becoming a Buddha. According to the Hinayana understanding, only an especially gifted person, and indeed only one such person in an entire eon, is capable of becoming a Buddha. The Mahayana traditions, by contrast, teach that everyone should aspire to eventually become a Buddha, which means that, to begin with, everyone should aspire to become a bodhisattva.

- The Mahayana image of the bodhisattva is that of someone who is on the verge of entering nirvana but who, out of compassion, turns back, forsaking their own complete liberation to work tirelessly on behalf of the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering.

- For the Pure Land Buddhist schools, Amitabha (also known by the Japanese name Amida) only became a Buddha on the condition that it would enable him to most effectively work to liberate others. Amida Buddha is thought to dwell in a celestial Pure Land, from which he sends his rays of wisdom and compassion down into the world. For Pure Land Buddhists, Shakyamuni was a great historical teacher, but Amida is the ultimate Buddha.

The Three Bodies of the Buddha

- Relevant here is the Mahayana doctrine of the trikaya, or "three bodies," of the Buddha: the nirmanakaya (or manifestation body), the sambhogakaya (or enjoyment body), and the dharmakaya or Truth Body of the Buddha. Only the first of these three bodies, the nirmanakaya, refers to a flesh-and-blood body.

- The prime example of a nirmanakaya is Shakyamuni Buddha. Such an enlightened person is seen as a manifestation of the wisdom, compassion, and other virtues of the universal Buddha-nature.

- Hinayana Buddhist schools also developed a two-body doctrine to explain the difference between the mortal flesh and blood of Shakyamuni Buddha and the immortal virtues and truth or dharma to which he awakened. When they depict the Buddha in a statue, the physical form represents his rupakaya (or form body). The sometimes enormous size of the statue and the special marks, like long earlobes and the protrusion on the crown of his head, signify the virtues and verities of his dharmakaya (truth body).

- Meanwhile, a sambhogakaya is the celestial embodiment of a Buddha who over eons has accumulated an enormous surplus of karmic merit and who is able to aid others in overcoming obstacles on their way to enlightenment. His saving graces are enjoyed by earthly bodhisattvas through their meditative practices of visualization. Those who have faith in his grace are directly transported to his Pure Land after death.

Amida Buddha and the Pure Land

- The most famous sambhogakaya is Amitabha—that is, Amida Buddha. As the literal version of the story goes, a bodhisattva named Dharmakara became Amida Buddha through eons

of spiritual practice. Epitomizing the bodhisattva spirit of compassion, Dharmakara vowed from the beginning not to become a Buddha unless and until it meant that he could save anyone who sincerely called on his name.

- He achieved this, it is said, and he now sends down into the world his rays of light—beams of wisdom and compassion—from his Pure Land. Insofar as we call on his name and utterly rely on his grace or "other-power," we can be reborn in this paradise.

- Yet the Pure Land is not simply a paradise to be enjoyed. Rather, it is a land that is free of all the physical and psychological obstacles to attaining enlightenment and becoming a Buddha ourselves. In the Pure Land one can, for example, hear Buddhist teachings whenever one wishes and understand them without difficulty. In short, Amida Buddha's Pure Land is an optimal training ground for people to quickly and easily become Buddhas.

Merit Transfer, Other-Power, and Pure Land

- The idea of merit transfer was very important for the development of Mahayana Buddhism. In the beginning it was thought that by doing good deeds and spiritual practices, one could either enjoy the fruit of this good karma in this life, or one could save up this merit and spend it on attaining a better rebirth for one's next life.

- Early on, the idea developed that one could also dedicate one's karmic merit to someone else, with an example being to assist a deceased loved one to attain a better rebirth. As with other teachings, Mahayana Buddhists radicalized and universalized the idea of merit transfer. The scholar Paul Williams writes that "in [the case of] Māhāyana … merit transference is always for the benefit of all sentient beings, usually in order that they may all attain perfect enlightenment."

- This radicalized and universalized idea of merit transfer leads to the idea of a Buddha working on behalf of all sentient beings by way of establishing a Buddha Land or Pure Land. According to the earliest recorded teachings maintained by the Hinayana schools, Shakyamuni Buddha claimed to be nothing more than a person who had awakened to what it really means to be a person.

- He can teach us to do the same, but in the end, we have to do our own work. We have to study, live an ethical life, and meditate on our own, by means of our own effort. No one can do these things for us.

- By contrast, the Mahayana tradition of Pure Land Buddhism says that you can reach nirvana by taking a piggyback ride on the broad shoulders, the Great Vehicle, of Amida Buddha. Indeed, according to Shinran, the only way anyone has ever been able to get to nirvana is by the grace, the other-power, of Amida Buddha.

- This is reminiscent of a Christian story about a man who, before he found Christ, always felt like he was walking alone, leaving only one set of footprints in the sand. After he found Christ, he always felt like there were two sets of footprints; he felt that Christ was his constant companion on every step of the journey of his life.

- But then, he fell on hard times, losing his job, his health, and his loved ones. Looking down, wondering how he could continue to keep walking, he again saw only one set of footprints. Why, he cried out, had Christ left him alone when he needed Him most?

- However, then he heard an inner voice: "I have not left you alone, I am carrying you." This Christian story about relying on a higher power to carry us through the lows of this life resonates deeply with Pure Land Buddhism.

The Truth Body of the Buddha

- Zen Buddhists do not usually speak of other-power, nor do they think of the Buddha in terms of a celestial sambhogakaya. It could be said that Zen Buddhists rely on self-power, but, unlike the Pure Land point of view, they do not think of this self-power as a form of ego-power.

- Rather, they think of it as the power that naturally emanates from the true self, not as the willful force of the delusive ego. This true self is neither outside oneself nor limited to the borders of our physical bodies or mental processes. The true self is our Buddha-nature. In other words, the dharmakaya of the Buddha—the ultimate truth of who and what the Buddha is—is the ultimate truth of who and what we are.

SUGGESTED READING AND VIEWING

BBC, *The Long Search: The Land of the Disappearing Buddha*.

Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*.

Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What are the three bodies of the Buddha, and how does this compare to the Christian idea of the Trinity?

2 Who is Amida Buddha for Pure Land Buddhists? How does Zen understand the ultimate sense of the Buddha to be the true self rather than either a historical person or a transcendent savior?

MIND IS BUDDHA: IF YOU MEET HIM, KILL HIM!

LESSON 11

The Buddha is our true self, yet our ignorant egos stand in the way of realizing this. We thus see the Buddha as something outside ourselves, something that we can believe in or not, and something that we can pray to and serve or not. We may even see the Buddha as something that we can one day become—but not as something that, deep down, we already are. As long as we see the Buddha as something outside ourselves, we can never see into the Buddha as our own true nature. This is why the founder of the Rinzai Zen tradition, the 9th-century Chinese Zen master Linji, shockingly teaches: "If you encounter the Buddha, kill the Buddha!"

The True Buddha

- Linji's point is that the so-called Buddha that one would encounter on the road somewhere—the Buddha that one would see as something or someone outside oneself—is not the real Buddha. In effect, he is telling us to smash all idols of the Buddha.

- The difference between an idol and an icon—that is, the difference between a false substitute and a genuine symbol—is crucial to all religious traditions. Jews and Muslims are stricter than Christians in forbidding all images of God.

- For centuries after the Buddha died, it was forbidden to make images of him. It was not until the 1st century BCE that Buddhists began to make sculptures and other images of the Buddha. They were inspired by Greek sculpture and motivated by a compassionate desire to offer people a way to approach truths through beautiful and didactic forms.

- In the BBC documentary *The Long Search: The Land of the Disappearing Buddha*, the modern Japanese Zen master Ōmori Sōgen, after practicing the martial art of sword fighting, bows to an image in an alcove. The narrator asks him, "Is that the Buddha you are bowing to?"

- The Zen master answers that it is a form of Buddha, namely Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. He then adds: "When I bow to it, I bow to something in myself. That something I call compassion." The image outside himself is merely a reminder of what, ultimately, he finds working in and through his own heart.

- The 9th-century Chinese Zen master Yantou says, "Haven't you heard that what enters through the gate is not the family treasure?" In other words, whatever comes from the outside is not your true self. Buddha is nothing outside of one's own heart and mind. One's true heart-mind is the Buddha.

Buddhas are Unselfconscious

- The Zen master Shidō Bunan gives this advice: "When one is compassionate and unaware of it, one is a Buddha." And Dōgen—a quite philosophical Zen master—tells us that "When Buddhas are truly Buddhas, there is no need for them to be conscious of themselves as Buddhas." Being self-conscious of oneself as a Buddha is somewhat like saying to oneself at a party, "I am really dancing so well, so natural and free." That kind of self-consciousness is a sure way to get out of the groove and step on one's own feet.

- The Zen school has also been called the Buddha-mind school. But what exactly is the Buddha-mind that we can awaken to and realize as our true self? The 18th-century Japanese Zen master Hakuin refers us to the traditional Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of the four types of wisdom. The Buddha-mind is said to manifest in these four ways: as "Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, the Universal Nature Wisdom, the Marvelous Observing Wisdom, and the Perfecting-of-Action Wisdom."

  - The first of these is the perfectly still, clear, and pure mind attained through deep states of meditation.
  - The second wisdom of the Buddha-mind is the ability to see all things equally in this impartial light. All things are interconnected, and each one reflects the whole universe from its own vantage point.
  - The third type of wisdom is the ability to discern differences: each thing is an utterly unique focal point of the universe, related to, yet different from, everything else.
  - The fourth type of wisdom is the ability to put the awareness of both equality and difference into action.

Nondualism: Neither Idealism nor Materialism

- Although it has been called the Buddha-mind School, the philosophy of Zen is neither an idealism nor a realism, neither a mentalism nor a materialism. It is, rather, a nondualism. The modern Zen philosopher Nishitani Keiji tells the story of the 10th-century Zen master Fayan Wenyi.

- He was converted from a "consciousness-only" school of Buddhist philosophy to a Zen experience of nondualism when he was asked whether a big rock lying in the garden in front of him was inside or outside of his mind. Fayan eventually realized that saying either inside or outside would not do justice to a direct and nondual experience of the rock.

- In such an experience, the rock is neither inside nor outside of the mind; the rock is the mind at that moment. Nishitani concludes that Zen nondualism can be captured no more by a one-sided subjective idealism than by an equally one-sided naïve materialism.

- The universe is both mind and matter. Dōgen teaches that "there are two approaches to studying the Buddha Way: to study with the mind and to study with the body." Yet these two paths converge insofar as on the one hand, one discovers that "mountains and rivers, the great earth, the sun, moon and stars are the mind. … walls, tiles, and pebbles are the mind." On the other hand, one realizes that "the whole world in all ten directions is this true human body."

- The whole truth of this nondual reality cannot be grasped objectively. Indeed, such grasping always constricts its object and divorces it from the subject. It can be endlessly analyzed intellectually, but such analysis only breaks it apart into pieces which can never be entirely stitched back together without remainder, at least as long as the subject who is analyzing and reconstructing remains aloof from the object being analyzed and reconstructed.

- Instead, holistic awakening is necessary. The practice of zazen is physical as well as psychological. The breath mediates these dimensions of the self as well as the inner and outer dimensions of self and world. Meditating on the breath holistically reminds us of the whole of reality.

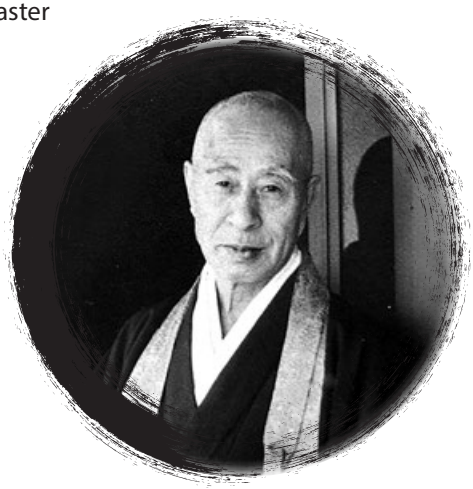
What Is the Buddha?

- This lesson concludes with some famous kōans that deal with the question: What is the Buddha? Keep in mind that kōans and commentary on them are not trying to conceptually clarify an already settled doctrine. Rather, they repeatedly push you to go one step further on a never-ending journey of deepening and developing experiential wisdom.

- After a practitioner named Mazu had become a Zen master, a monk once asked him, "What is Buddha?" Mazu answered, "Mind is Buddha." In a comment appended to this kōan, however, the 13th-century Chinese Zen master Wumen chides: "Don't you know that one has to rinse out his mouth for three days if he has uttered the word 'Buddha'? If he is a real Zen man, he will stop his ears and rush away when he hears 'Mind is Buddha.'"

- In a sequel kōan in Wumen's collection *The Gateless Barrier*, Mazu responds to the same question: What is Buddha? Mazu this time answers, "No mind, no Buddha." Wumen approves, commenting: "If you can see into it here, your Zen study has been completed."

- The modern Japanese Zen master Shibayama Zenkei explains: "Earlier, [the monk] had come to Master [Mazu] seeking Buddha outside himself, and in order to break through his illusion [Mazu] told him, 'Mind is Buddha.' Now that [Mazu] sees that many disciples have become attached to 'Mind is Buddha' he says, 'No mind, no Buddha' in order to smash and wipe away their attachment to 'Mind is Buddha.'"



- Mazu himself had clarified his apparently contradictory teachings. He responded to another monk who asked, "Why do you teach that 'Mind is Buddha'?" Mazu replied, "It is in order to stop a baby crying." The monk asked, "What is it like when the baby stops crying?" Mazu's answer was "No mind, no Buddha."

- One of Mazu's successors commented, "'Mind is Buddha' is the phrase for one who wants medicine while he has no disease. 'No mind, no Buddha' is the phrase for one who cannot do away with the medicine when his disease has been cured."

- From the beginning, we are Buddhas. However, not realizing this, we seek the Buddha outside ourselves. The dis-ease we experience is of our own making. And even when we find a good teaching, we turn that medicine into a poison by objectifying the mind and attaching ourselves to the concept of Buddha.

- In conclusion, always keep in mind that the path of Zen proceeds by way of subtraction, not addition. Although shopping malls, online markets, and even some temples are filled with trinkets and trophies of addition Zen, real Zen is subtraction Zen. Zen is not about adding new ideas and identities. It is a matter of freeing us from our fixations on the ones we already have.

SUGGESTED READING

Addiss, *Zen Sourcebook*, 35–42, 47–51, and 250–251.

Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, chapters 18, 27, 30, and 33.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What do Zen masters mean when they say that "mind is Buddha"?

2 What does the Zen master Linji mean when he says to kill the Buddha if you encounter him?

Meditation Checkup:
Dealing with Unavoidable Pain

The conclusion of Lesson 11 is a meditation checkup focused on avoiding unavoidable pain. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following tips serve as a summary of the checkup.

Posture and Bodily Rehabilitation

- Meditation can reveal how much posture matters. Good posture improves our mental alertness, our mood, and so much more. Sitting on the floor can improve one's flexibility.
- It can be helpful to think of the practice of meditation as, in part, a practice of bodily rehabilitation. That will likely allow you to experience the physical discomforts involved along the way in a very different light.
- People tend to think of pain as a purely physical sensation. But the mental interpretation of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a painful sensation makes a huge difference in how people actually experience it.
- The meditator Drew Leder has explored and explained various valuable methods of dealing with physical pain. These include strategies of transcending as well as befriending the body.

Approaching Pain

- According to one Zen approach, in situations of unavoidable pain, the only way out is in. Like a bear caught in a bear trap, by fighting to escape the inescapable, people merely compound the pain. The only way out of inescapable pain is to go right into it.

- When one's legs hurt while sitting in zazen, one should not get angry at the pain and wish it were not there. Ironically, this only makes it worse: The person will begin mentally suffering the fact that he or she is physically suffering the pain.
- Of course, if the leg pain is unbearable, and certainly if you think it might cause injury, you should stand up and do something about it. In a group meditation, try your best to decide in advance whether you are able to commit to whatever the sitting requirements are. Consult with the leader in advance if special arrangements may need to be made.
- The point of meditation, after all, is not to heroically endure pain. Take care not to injure yourself or aggravate injuries.

DYING TO LIVE: BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

LESSON 12

This lesson looks at the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. Over the past century, there have been many Christians who have taken up the practice of Zen meditation without leaving the church. In fact, there have been a number of Catholic priests who have become Zen teachers. There have also been many Protestant clergy and laypeople who have claimed that their Christian faith is compatible with and deepened by their practice of Zen Buddhism.

Early Encounters and Misunderstandings

- In Japan, there is a tradition of esoteric Buddhism called Shingon, which was founded by Kūkai in the 9th century. For Shingon Buddhists, the dharmakaya is the cosmic Buddha called Dainichi Nyorai—the Great Sun Buddha that is the source of all light and life in the world. Indeed, all reality is thought to be the manifestation of Dainichi.

- When the first Christians arrived in Japan in the mid-16th century, the Jesuit missionaries led by Francis Xavier were told by their Japanese translator that the word *Dainichi* is the best translation for the word *God*. These early Christian missionaries thought that the Japanese must have already received a partial or corrupted version of the gospel of Christianity. For their part, the Japanese thought that the missionaries had come from the western land of the Buddha, India, and brought with them new doctrines of Buddhism.

- This period of mutual appreciation based on mutual misunderstanding ended after the missionaries were confronted with Buddhist—and in particular Zen—doctrines of emptiness and nothingness. Additionally, the pivotal Buddhist doctrine of no-self sounded like the antithesis of their core belief in an eternal soul.

- For centuries following this fateful first encounter in Japan, Buddhism—and specifically its doctrines of no-self and emptiness—became an object of both fascination and fearful condemnation for Western philosophers and theologians. Only in the 20th century was the prejudiced misunderstanding of these teachings gradually reformed. However, no-self and emptiness remain the most intellectually and emotionally challenging doctrines of Buddhism for Westerners to wrap their heads and hearts around.

What is God?

- A relevant question for this lesson's topic is: What does it mean to believe in God? When we ask questions like this, we assume a lot. To begin with, we assume that we understand what we are asking. In this case, we assume that we know what the word *God* means and what it would mean to believe in God. Another question is whether God is male rather than female. Additionally, how could we tell?

- Buddhists, even Pure Land Buddhists, do not believe in a transcendent being who exists independent of the being's creation. Zen Buddhism is most compatible with panentheism. The term *panentheism* means "all is in God."

- Many biblical passages lend themselves to a panentheistic interpretation, such as when God says, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" and when Paul affirms the idea that "in Him we live and move and have our being." Such a panentheistic conception of the biblical God does not, after all, sound so very different from many Zen pronouncements.

Experiencing the Unborn Buddha-Mind

- Buddhism teaches that everything that is born must die. This is the law of impermanence. Everything that exists because of the conditions that allow it to exist will cease to exist when those conditions no longer hold.

- The good news—the gospel of Buddhism—is that there is something on the other side of the door: a doorway through which we can pass if only we can shed the bulky armor we've vainly attached to the fragile shells of our egos.

Buddhism calls this something that is no-thing the unborn, unmade, and unconditioned. In a famous passage from an early sutra, the Buddha teaches:

> There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks, there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned.

- Because there is the unborn, there is nirvana. The attainment of nirvana is the realization of the unborn. There was a tendency in early Buddhism to understand nirvana as somewhere beyond samsara—as a transcendent abode beyond this world of space and time.

- The Mahayana tradition, and especially the Zen school, brought nirvana back down to earth. The great 2nd-century Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna taught that nirvana is not a different place to be; it is a different way of being here. Life in this world for the unenlightened is samsara, but for the enlightened, life in this same world is nirvana.

- Zen masters call on us to realize the unborn here and now. And they tell us that we can fully do this only if we cease perceiving this world of ceaseless change as one of birth and death.

- Rebirth, in Buddhism, is first and foremost moment-to-moment rebirth. Each moment of change is, in a sense, the death of an old form and the birth of a new one. The boiling water disappears as water to become steam. A teenage adolescent has to die to be reborn as a young adult, and so on.

- Thich Nhat Hanh points out that modern science agrees with Buddhism in this regard. He quotes the French scientist Antoine Lavoisier as saying, "Nothing is created, and nothing is destroyed." And he remarks that this is just what the Heart Sutra tells us: "One form of energy can only become another form of energy."

- Yet we constantly suffer from worrying about death while we are alive. We do not simply live here and now, but, haunted by thoughts of our mortality, we run ahead in anticipation of death. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger even claims that this anxious anticipation of death is the defining trait of being human.

- But what do religions like Christianity really teach about life and death? Does Christianity simply promise our anxious egos that they can live forever? Or, rather, does not its core teaching say that we must die to our egos to be reborn in the eternal life of Christ?

Views on Death and Rebirth

- The idea of an existential or spiritual death and rebirth is not at all foreign to religions such as Christianity. Indeed, it is at the very heart of Jesus's teaching. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read: "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This teaching—that each of us must die to the old Adam to be reborn in the true life of Christ—is repeated throughout all four Gospels.

- Baptism is, as it were, a ritual drowning of the ego and resurrection of the true self. Perhaps one can even say that in the Christian tradition, Christ, as the incarnation of divine love, is the true self. This seems to be implied when St. Paul famously says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

- This core Christian teaching does not seem to be very far from the Zen master Dōgen's teachings about life, death, and about enlightenment as a matter of "dropping off the body-mind." Dōgen writes:

> When you let go of both your body and your mind, forget them both, and throw yourself into the house of Buddha, and when functioning begins from the side of the Buddha drawing you in to accord with it, then, with no need for any expenditure of either physical or mental effort, you are freed from birth-and-death and become Buddha.

- It has been said that this particular text, and especially this passage, may have been composed by Dōgen for a Pure Land Buddhist rather than a Zen Buddhist audience because its language of letting actions come "from the side of the Buddha" rather than from one's own efforts resonates with the Pure Land teaching of other-power more than it does with the Zen teaching of self-power. Be that as it may, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism are not as far apart as they are sometimes made out to be.

Conclusion

- The Dominican and German theologian Meister Eckhart says that obedience is an imperfect releasement unto God's will. As long as there is a duality between God and servant, there remains a trace of self-will that resists the one divine will. "Where there are two," he says, "there is defection." The purely good man is said to be "so much of one will with God that he wills what God wills and in the way that God wills it." Furthermore, in the final "breakthrough," according to Eckhart, "I stand free of my own will and of the will of God."

- Ultimately, for Eckhart, the complete abandonment of self-will also entails letting go of God's will. One is then released into the "pure activity" of living "empty and free" and "without why." In his most radical (and perhaps heretical) teachings, Eckhart may be closer to Zen Buddhism than he is to either the orthodox teachings of Christianity or those of Pure Land Buddhism, which both preserve a distinction between the self and the higher or other power that it is called on to serve and be saved by.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "Naturalness in Zen and Shin Buddhism."

Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God*

Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What does Zen mean by the Great Death, and why it is necessary to pass through this experience to truly live?

2 How is the idea of a spiritual death and rebirth in Zen comparable to similar ideas in Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity?

ZEN BEYOND MYSTICISM:

EVERYDAY EVEN MIND

LESSON 13

The 14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once said, "I pray to God that he may make me free of God." He also said: "The highest and final letting go, of which humans are capable, is letting go of God for the sake of God." Much like Zen kōans, these statements boggle the mind—yet also, for many, inspire the spirit.

Bowing to the Buddha

- The 9th-century Chinese Zen master Huangbo taught that "If you would only rid yourselves of the concepts of ordinary and enlightened, you would find that there is no other Buddha than the Buddha in your own Mind." Huangbo is thus a strong advocate of what his successor Linji calls "killing the Buddha"—that is, smashing all idols and casting away all objectifications of the Buddha as someone or something other than one's true self.

- Yet at the same time, Huangbo was known for having a protruding lump on his forehead from touching his head to the floor so often in his lifelong practice of making prostrations to the Buddha. Before one is enlightened, one bows down to the Buddha because one has not yet realized that one is the Buddha.

- After enlightenment, one bows down to the Buddha because that is still the appropriate thing to do. Not only is it an ongoing reminder to oneself of what one truly is—a Buddha who compassionately bows down in service to everything and everyone—it is also a teaching to those around one of how they too can realize and remember this.

The Disappearing and Reappearing Buddha

- The practice of prostrations was explained by the 14th-century Japanese Zen master Bassui in this manner: "As for the practice of bowing down before the Buddhas, this is merely a way of horizontalizing the mast of ego to realize the Buddha-nature." Bassui implies that once the "mast of ego" has been brought down, the currents of the vast sea of the Buddha-nature, our true self, will naturally take us where we need to go.

- Once the mast of ego has been leveled, we no longer see the Buddha as outside us but rather as our true self. Our interconnected individual lives are waves on the great ocean of the Buddha-nature.

- Zen is not atheistic any more than it is theistic. It rejects religious ideas and images no more than it clings to them. We can, after all, become attached to the idea of having no attachments.

- A monk once asked Huangbo's contemporary Zhaozhou: "How about when one arrives carrying not a single thing?" In other words, he was asking: What more is there to do once one has let go of all attachments? Zhaozhou responded: "Cast that down!" He meant to let go of your attachment to the idea of having let go of all attachments.

Everyday Even Mind Is the Way

- When he was a student, Zhaozhou once asked his teacher, Nanquan, about what the way—the dao—is. Nanquan answered that the way is "everyday even mind."

- The Buddha-mind that is attuned to the way of the world should not be understood as some special state of consciousness, though altered states of consciousness can and do often arise in intense periods of Zen meditation. They can be euphoric, alarming, merely odd, or completely overwhelming.

- Even advanced practitioners can mistake them for genuine breakthrough experiences. They are not. They might be caused simply by prolonged sensory or sleep deprivation. Or they may be caused by the sudden resurfacing of repressed memories or other unresolved psychological issues. One may need to deal with such psychological issues through therapy rather than meditation, and, if so, this course advises that one do that especially before engaging in the rigors of kōan practice.

- Altered states of consciousness and mystical experiences are referred to by the term *makyō* in Zen, a term that translates as "devilish states." They can be a good sign that one has attained a certain intensity of concentration, but they are bad insofar as they distract one or fool one into thinking that they are the aim of Zen meditation. They are neither good nor bad. They just happen. While you are meditating, just let them come and let them go.

- The teacher Tanaka Hōjū Rōshi has said that the Zen expression "everyday even mind" refers to a mind that is placid like a waveless surface of water—a mind that is bright like a spotless mirror.

This mind is able to reflect and respond to the vicissitudes of everyday life with spontaneity, sincerity, and compassion because it is not obsessed with its own agendas.

- In short, by everyday even mind is meant both the equanimity that does not get egoistically attached to or fixated on anything, and the engaged everyday mind that is thereby able to fully and fluidly attend to the infinitely complex and ceaselessly shifting way of the world.

- However, if we try to grasp the everyday even mind, the grasping mind turns it into an object of knowledge. But if we don't somehow come to know it, then we simply remain mired in mindless ignorance. Once again, enlightenment involves a kind of intuitive wisdom rather than an objectifying knowledge.

Everyday Chores are the Way

- Zhaozhou went on to become a famous Zen master, and he sought to return his students again and again to the everyday even mind. In a story that has become a famous kōan, a monk, having just entered Zhaozhou's monastery, requests instruction.

- In going straight to the master rather than just a senior monk, he is no doubt asking for the highest teaching and probably also wanting to test the master to see if staying in this monastery would be worth his while.

Zhaozhou asks the monk whether he had already eaten breakfast. The monk replies, "Yes." Zhaozhou's reply was: "Then wash your bowls."

- On one level, speaking metaphorically as Zen masters often do, Zhaozhou may have been asking whether the monk had already had an initial experience of awakening—he is asking whether he already had his breakthrough breakfast, so to speak.

- If so, then he needs to "wash his bowls"—that is, he needs to wipe his mind clean of the pride of having attained something. At the same time, in a more direct and literal sense, Zhaozhou's instruction to "wash your bowls" indicates that enlightenment is ultimately to be found right in the midst of the chores of everyday life.

Zen as a Path of Trans-Mysticism

- Zen is not ultimately a matter of mysticism in the sense of a transcendent or otherworldly experience that transports one beyond the humdrum of the mundane world. The path of Zen leads rather to a wholehearted and fully mindful engagement in the extraordinarily ordinary activities of everyday life.

- Accordingly, the modern Japanese philosopher and lay Zen master Ueda Shizuteru interprets Zen as a path of what he calls non-mysticism. Ueda was also a foremost scholar of Meister Eckhart. In fact, he first coined his term *non-mysticism* while writing on Eckhart before he applied it to Zen. Although he was initially struck by the profound parallels between the two, in the end, Ueda suggested that Zen goes even further than Eckhart does in shedding the residues of an otherworldly mysticism.

- Meanwhile, the term *trans-mysticism* can be used to explain his illuminating account of the circuitous path of Zen, a path which, in the end, brings us back to everyday life. The path of trans-mysticism entails a double negation—that is, a twofold process of letting go.

- To begin with, one must let go of one's habitual identification with the self-encapsulated ego. In the end, one must let go of even the mystical experience of union with the divine. It can be helpful to think of this process as taking park in four steps:

  1. The first step is the transcendence of the ego, which is common to all forms of religious experience.

  2. The second step is the experience of union with the divine. This is often considered to be the hallmark of mystical experience.

  3. The third step, the breakthrough beyond mystical union to an absolute nothingness, can be understood as a self-overcoming of mysticism.

  4. And the fourth step, the return to egoless activity in midst of the everyday world, completes this self-overcoming process of trans-mysticism.

- The experience of union with the divine is the peak of mysticism, according to Ueda. Yet both Meister Eckhart and Zen take the ecstatic momentum still further, such that Eckhart talks about "breaking through" the persona of God to what he calls the "silent desert of the Godhead," the ineffable origin and ground of reality that lies beyond all distinctions.

- It lies beyond the Trinity and even beyond the distinction between creator and created. Since it is utterly beyond or beneath anything that can be defined or described, Eckhart sometimes calls this abyssal ground of the Godhead nothingness rather than being.

- Zen also prefers to speak of the ultimate ground or nature of reality in terms of nothingness rather than being. Ueda follows other modern Japanese Zen philosophers in speaking of an absolute nothingness that underlies or envelops even the distinction between being and relative nothingness.

- Eckhart teaches us to see all things in God or in the light of God. However, Zen ultimately teaches us to drop all references to the Buddha as anything outside of the everyday. Indeed, Zen urges us to return from an experience of mystical or meditative oneness with the one to an undistracted mindfulness of the many.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "Letting Go of God for Nothing."

Ueda, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism."

———, "The Zen Experience of the Truly Beautiful."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is meant by the Zen teaching that everyday even mind is the way?

2 Why is it better to speak of Zen as a path of trans-mysticism than as a school of mysticism?

ENGAGED ZEN:
FROM INNER TO OUTER
PEACE

LESSON 14

Zen is not about acquiring supernatural or supernormal powers. The way of Zen is instead a matter of putting our feet on the ground and awakening, step by step, to the present moment—to the wondrousness of mundane matters and the weightiness of everyday errands.

The Mahayana Affirmation of Lay Life

- One of the distinguishing characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism is that it breaks down the dichotomy between priesthood and laity. An affirmation of the spiritual depth of everyday lay life is exemplified in the legends and sayings of Layman Pang.

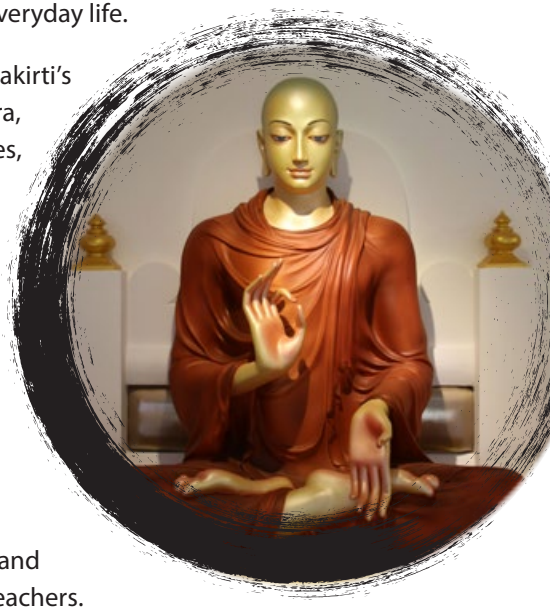
- In the early centuries of Buddhism and in so-called Hinayana schools such as Theravada, up until very recently, meditation was for the most part practiced exclusively by monks and nuns. Laypeople would practice things like charity, especially in support of monks (and sometimes nuns), as well as morality: right speech, action, and livelihood.

- By doing these supposedly preparatory practices, lay people were thought to accumulate karmic merit, such that they would eventually be reborn as someone ready to leave home and devote themselves to the ultimately liberating practice of meditation. Only if one was free from the chores of everyday lay life, it was thought, could one become a serious spiritual practitioner.

- The Mahayana reform movement called this way of thinking into question. The Vimalakirti Sutra—a sutra composed around 100 CE that became one of the most important for the Zen tradition—turns the privileging of priesthood on its head by having a layman be the teacher of monks.

- In the story of this sutra, the layman Vimalakirti has fallen ill, and the Buddha sends his attendant monks to pay their respects and to learn from him. The figure of the layman teacher Vimalakirti epitomizes the idea of the bodhisattva as an enlightened and enlightening being who, out of boundless compassion, remains in the world to work toward liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

- The Buddha sends both his Hinayana disciples and his Mahayana bodhisattvas to Vimalakirti to inquire about his illness. Vimalakirti teaches them to free themselves from otherworldly aspirations and to find true spirituality in bodily existence and in the midst of the mundane activities of everyday life.



- A goddess appears in Vimalakirti's room and teaches Shariputra, one of the Hinayana disciples, not to denigrate women's bodies in particular. More than 1,000 years later, Dōgen tells his Zen community that they should "not discriminate between men and women" and that women are just as capable as men of attaining the highest enlightenment and becoming strong guiding teachers. Eight centuries after Dōgen, female Zen masters are finally being recognized, including Westerners such as Charlotte Joko Beck.

Meditation Retreats Are Not Escapes

- Vimalakirti teaches bodhisattvas that they must not think of remaining in the world to liberate others as a sacrifice of their own liberation, since such work in the world is in fact the highest form of liberation. Meditation should not be understood or experienced as an escape from the world. We need to be liberated not from the world of everyday life but rather from the desire to escape it.

- We do need to occasionally retreat from our busy routines and clear our hearts and minds. Meditation retreats are an exceptional way to do this. But we must be careful not to fall into the trap of escapism, especially as one gets past the initial physical and mental difficulties of meditation and begins to experience the deep peace and joy that it brings.

- Vimalakirti takes a step in breaking down the supposed dichotomy between meditation and everyday living when he reprimands Shariputra for sitting in quiet meditation under a tree in the forest. "Shariputra," he says, "you should not assume that this sort of sitting is true quiet sitting!" Rather, he goes on, "Not rising out of your meditative state of stillness and peace and yet showing yourself in the ceremonies of daily life—that is [true] quiet sitting."

Being at Peace

- Vimalakirti's criticism of Shariputra's attachment to practicing quiet and restful meditation in the forest is an important corrective to a tendency to view meditation merely as a means of escaping the noisiness and unrest of city life. Nevertheless, the contemporary Vietnamese Zen master and founder of Engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh, recognizes that to truly bring peace to the world, we need to be at peace ourselves.

- For this, most of us need to at least occasionally retreat from the street to the cushion and cloister. In between such retreats, however, to the street we must return, now with more to offer. It is interesting to note that Vimalakirti is presented not just as a layman, but as a rich layman. It is said that he uses his immeasurable riches to bring relief to the poor. On a metaphorical level, it is said that the great wealth possessed by bodhisattvas is the holy Dharma, the teachings that they unstintingly give to others.

Peace and Justice: Which Is Primary?

- The idea that we need to "be peace to bring peace" may cut against the grain of our inclination to not waste time by sitting around and navel-gazing but rather to get out there and change the world for the better. Of course, it is important to fight for equal rights and justice and to upset the stability of the status quo when the status quo leads to peace for some at the expense of others. The fight for justice, after all, has the aim of eventually establishing a truer and more universal peace.

- Yet sometimes we lose sight of that ultimate purpose of our fight, and we end up wanting retributive justice more than, or even instead of, peaceful coexistence. We want to right the wrongs that have been done to us and to others even more than we want to heal the wounds of the world.

- Bernie Glassman is an American Zen master who for decades has pioneered the combination of Zen practice with social activism. On a retreat with Glassman, the comparative theologian Paul Knitter confessed to being torn between feeling like he needed to sit in meditation and wanting to get up and go to El Salvador to try and help stop the death squads.

COMPLEMENTARY TEACHINGS

Thich Nhat Hanh is among the Zen masters who view the core teachings of Christianity and Buddhism as complementary as long as we look deeply into them and, more importantly, sincerely put them into practice. As the subtitle of one of his books suggests, Jesus and Buddha are spiritual siblings, not religious rivals.

- Glassman responded, "They are both absolutely necessary." And then he left Knitter with a kōan-like admonishment: "But you won't be able to stop the death squads until you realize your oneness with them." In effect, Glassman was echoing Jesus's core teaching: If we don't learn to love not just our neighbors and our countrymen but also even our enemies as ourselves, we cannot truly bring peace to the world.

SUGGESTED READING

King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*.

Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, chapter 7.

Parallax Press, ed., *True Peace Work*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Mahayana Buddhism break down the barrier between retreating to the monastery and engaging in lay life?

2 What does it mean to say that we need to be peace to bring peace?

Meditation Checkup:
Dealing with Distractions

The conclusion of Lesson 14 is a meditation checkup focused on dealing with distractions. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following tips serve as a summary of the checkup.

Discipling the Mind

- Dealing with distracting thoughts, like dealing with physical discomforts, is an important part of the practice of meditation. These are not prerequisites; they are part and parcel of the practice itself.
- The modern Sōtō Zen master Shunryu Suzuki gives some very helpful advice: Every time you catch your mind wandering and bring it back to the practice, this is nourishing your practice. Returning again and again from mental tangents is what keeps the wheel of meditation in motion.
- Another teaching Suzuki Rōshi gives in this regard is even deeper and broader. He says that if you want to control your mischievous mind, don't try to control it. Do the opposite: Give it a wide-open space in which to roam.

CHASING DISTRACTIONS

If you chase after distractions or try to chase them off, you will end up just feeding them more energy.

The Mirror-Mind

- Zen masters often speak of the mirror-mind. They compare the clear mind to a mirror that just lets things show up as they are and lets them go without leaving a trace when they pass. Eventually, the luminous blue sky of the mirror-mind will shine so brightly that cloudy thoughts will dissipate on their own.

- The purpose of meditation is not to polish the mirror-mind so as to keep it from being stained by impure thoughts. The point is to discover that the unstainable mirror-mind has been there all along, a discovery that allows it to function more freely. The point of Zen is to let the mind respond freely to thoughts and things without getting stuck, without getting attached to craving or loathing any particular thought or thing.

THE DHARMA OF KARMA:

WE REAP WHAT WE SOW

LESSON 15

The term *karma* is a Buddhist word that has been adopted into everyday English vocabulary. However, our loose use of the word sometimes strays rather far from its meaning in the teachings of Buddhism, also known as dharma. The dharma of karma is a teaching of causality. It is a teaching that our actions have both causes and effects that we should pay attention to.

Background

- The dharma of karma is concerned with mental and verbal as well as physical actions. The Buddha paid much attention to the mental karma of intentions and the verbal karma of speech. For instance, the idea of right speech in the Buddha's Eightfold Path includes refraining not only from lying but also from using rude and abusive speech, from belittling others, and from gossiping. The Buddha taught that we should not only speak truthfully but also kindly.

- Despite many popular treatments of karma, the basic Buddhist idea of karma is not that of a supernatural force which guarantees that what goes around comes around. The point of the teaching of karma is not to fully explain the present, much less to perfectly predict the future. The point is to understand that our actions have effects—not only on others but, first and foremost, on ourselves.

Situated Freedom

- Imagine a man who starts drinking a cup of coffee in the morning. There are various social, psychological, and biological reasons that influenced him in his decision to form this habit. But, a Buddhist would say, nothing forced him to do it. There was at least an element of free choice involved. To some extent, he chose not to resist the biological urges, social peer pressures, and seductive advertisements.

- Now imagine that at some point, he starts drinking two, three, or even four cups of coffee a day. He will begin craving coffee every morning. His self-created habit in turn created that craving. Perhaps it even becomes an addiction.

- The good news is that he still has some freedom to change course. Think of the karmic effects of past actions as being like the momentum a large sailboat has as it moves in a certain direction across the ocean. The wind and the waves correspond to all the conditions of the present situation, including the effects that other people's actions have on an individual.

- Someone may be moving in a wholesome direction, but a strong side wind may blow that person off course. Alternatively, someone may be moving in an unwholesome direction, but luckily, the winds of fortune happen to bring the person back on course. In any case, how a person trims the sails and steers the rudder of his or her "life-sailboat" is up to that individual.

- In the case of the man's coffee addiction, he cannot suddenly stop craving it. If he tries to quit cold turkey, he may experience headaches and be unpleasant to be around. But he can wean himself down to two cups and then one cup a day. Perhaps with professional counseling, he may even learn to switch to herbal tea.

- Contrary to some popular past and present misconceptions, karma is not a teaching of determinism. It is rather a teaching of situated freedom. Quoting the words of the Buddha, the Theravada Buddhist monk and scholar Nyanaponika Thera emphasizes what he calls "the freedom inherent in the karmic situation." He says that "the lawfulness which governs karma does not operate with mechanical rigidity but allows for a considerably wide range of modifications in the ripening of the fruit."

The Fox Kōan

- The most famous kōan about karma is the so-called Fox Kōan, which is placed second in *The Gateless Barrier* collection of kōans. The Fox Kōan is meant to bring one back down to earth and, specifically, to keep one from falling into the trap of what has come to be known as "wild fox Zen."

- In the story of the kōan, an ancient abbot of a monastery condemned himself to be reborn as a wild fox for 500 lifetimes by saying that an enlightened man "does not fall into karmic causality." He was finally freed from the fox body after being taught that an enlightened man "does not obscure karmic causality."

- The central question of the kōan is the relation between not falling into karmic causality and not obscuring karmic causality. To think that one has transcended the world of karmic causality—so that one does not need to pay attention to the causes and effects of one's actions—is in fact to blindly fall into karmic causality in the worst way.

Living without Expectations

- Because karma is a teaching of situated freedom, it is also a teaching of responsibility. We make our habits, and our habits make us. That means that we are responsible for who we become. In a sense, this is a very self-empowering idea: You are what you make of yourself.

- It is important to bear in mind that the Buddha taught that the precise working out of the results of karma is one of the so-called unthinkables, meaning that exactly what cause or set of causes led to this or that effect is incomprehensible. He taught that the web of karmic causes and effects is so complex that it is impossible to calculate what caused a specific thing to happen.

- In general, in Zen, thoughts of karmic merit and demerit are relegated to a relatively superficial level of teaching and practice. According to a famous and foundational legend, when Bodhidharma arrived in China, he was asked by Emperor Wu how much karmic merit the emperor had accumulated by having many temples built, sutras copied, and monks ordained.

- Bodhidharma replied, "No merit." True merit, he implied, comes from acting freely and responsibly without any egocentric calculations of merit. This phrase, "no merit," has become a basic teaching in Zen, and one often sees it written on scrolls of calligraphy.

- Yet this was apparently not all that Bodhidharma had to say about the dharma of karma. In another text attributed to him, we are taught to accept bad as well as good fortune as the results of our past karma.

- However, the Zen teaching of utterly accepting even disaster, illness, or death does not mean that we should not try to do anything and everything we can to prevent and alleviate such calamities. On the contrary, we can change reality—when it can be changed—only by accepting it in the sense of facing up to it.

- One of the secrets to happiness—as well as to discerning what we can change and what we cannot—is to accept that what is happening is what is happening. A second secret to happiness is as difficult as it is liberating. It is to have, in one's innermost heart, no expectations. Every expectation sets us up for disappointment.

- Even if an expectation is fulfilled, we merely break even. By contrast, if one works hard or gives freely without any expectation of reward, then one can truly appreciate as a gift the good results that may come one's way. This is why Bodhidharma sought to free Emperor Wu from his obsessions with earning merit.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

- Bodhidharma goes so far as to say that one should take responsibility even for one's misfortunes. This is hard to swallow on a metaphysical as well as on a practical level. In effect, he teaches us not say, "You reap what you sow," but rather to say, "I reap what I sow." The focus is always on one's own responsibility for one's own karma and one's own circumstances.

- Still, it is hard to refrain from generalizing his point, which problematically leads to pointing at others and their circumstances. When bad things happen to good people, as they often do, it does not seem right to think that they deserve it. The fact that bad things happen to good people is hard to explain in any manner whatsoever.

- There may be no really satisfying answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people. The Buddha and the Bible explain why bad things happen to bad people, but they don't really explain why they happen to good people. This leaves us with questions: Why did God create sinners? Why did people start acting badly and producing unwholesome karmic effects to begin with?

- In fact, the Buddha did not attempt to give an answer to the question of the origin of the universe and the beginning of bad karma. He taught us to attend to the workings of karma the best we can to become free and responsible. But he also taught us not to try and calculate why specific things happen to specific people or why the chains of bad karma started churning in the first place.

- The Buddha indicated that from time immemorial, we have been producing and reproducing bad karma on the basis of ignorance. He also said that while the cycle of ignorance and suffering is without beginning, it is not endless, or at least it need not be. We can put an end to ignorance and thus to needless suffering. This is the promise of nirvana.

SUGGESTED READING

Loy, "How to Drive Your Karma."

Thera, "Karma and Its Fruit."

Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, chapter 2.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What does it mean to say that we make our habits, and our habits, in turn, make us?

2 Why is the teaching of karma not a determinism or fatalism but rather a teaching of situated freedom?

ZEN MORALITY: FOLLOW AND THEN FORGET RULES

LESSON 16

Zen joins other schools of Buddhism in speaking of the so-called three learnings: morality, meditation, and wisdom. This lesson focuses on morality. Early Buddhists compiled the Buddha's moral instructions, largely consisting of monastic regulations, into a group of texts called the *Vinaya*. The moral regulations boil down to the precepts—that is, the basic rules for behavior that monastics and lay Buddhists vow to maintain.

Beyond Egoistic Conceptions of Good and Evil

- The 13th-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen stands out for the complexly philosophical nature of many of his writings and for his emphasis on morality. Especially in his later years, Dōgen stressed the moral causality of karma, the practice of repentance along with meditation, and the importance of taking the precepts.

- Dōgen was not the first Zen master in Japan to stress the importance of the moral precepts. The teacher of Dōgen's first Zen teacher, Myōan Eisai, claimed that the precepts are the foundation for Zen practice. Eisai made this claim in light of what he saw as a moral laxity in Japanese Buddhism at the time. In particular, Eisai was criticizing a self-styled Zen teacher named Dainichi Nōnin.

- Nōnin stressed the antinomian and apparently amoral aspects of Zen, such as Linji's teaching that people should just act naturally, eating when hungry and lying down when tired. Dōgen criticized Nōnin's false understanding of what it means to act naturally, citing his Chinese Zen teacher Rujing's denunciation of "the heresy of naturalism."

- Another potentially misleading—if misunderstood—teaching of Zen in this regard is prominent Buddhist figure Huineng's key kōan: "Think not of good, think not of evil. At this very moment, what is your original face before your father and mother were born?" This kōan pushes practitioners to awaken to their true self—the pure awareness of their open mind and heart—rather than identifying themselves first and foremost with the particulars of their biology and psychology.

- Huineng is not saying that one should never again think of good and evil. Rather, he is saying that we need to make such judgements from a nondualistic and non-egoistic awareness rather than a dualistic and egoistic distortion of the context in which we are making them.

- The teachings of Huineng and Linji have been subject to misunderstanding and misuse. Fortunately, Zen masters from Eisai and Dōgen in medieval Japan to Robert Aitkin and Reb Anderson in modern America have been there to remind us of the sense and significance of the precepts and other moral teachings of Zen.

The Basic Moral Precepts

- Whereas Eisai promoted taking the detailed Hinayana as well as the Mahayana precepts, Dōgen paired the precepts down to the most important: the 16 bodhisattva precepts that he thought lay as well as monastic Buddhists ought to take. Rinzai Buddhists today take a somewhat similar set of precepts. The bodhisattva precepts consist of:

    - Taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma (the Buddhist teachings), and the sangha (the Buddhist community).

    - The three pure precepts of observing prohibitions, doing good deeds, and benefitting all living beings.

    - The 10 grave precepts, namely: not to kill, steal, misuse sex, lie, deal in intoxicants, criticize the faults of lay or monastic bodhisattvas, praise oneself and disparage others, be stingy with the dharma or material goods, become angry, or revile the three treasures of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

From Prescription to Description

- The precepts and other prescriptions for behavior in Zen are not meant to be fixed rules that one should unwaveringly follow regardless of time and place. While many of Dōgen's writings are devoted to prescribing detailed monastic guidelines for everything from preparing food to washing one's face and using the toilet, these are not meant to be legalistic rules for a community of fundamentalists.

- Dōgen affirms the 10th-century Chinese Zen master Yunmen's statement that "in expressing full function, there are no fixed methods." Certainly, at first and for a long time, we need rules. Until we are able to discover that the spirit of the law emanates from within, from our own Buddha-nature, we need the letter of the law to provisionally guide us from without.

- Yet we should not get stuck at the level of doing good and not doing evil simply because that is what someone else is telling us to do and not to do. We should not be content to simply follow the rules of an externally decreed prescriptive and proscriptive morality. Insofar as we open the eye of wisdom, we open the heart of compassion—and, to that extent, our moral actions are increasingly done naturally and even effortlessly rather than artificially and forcefully.

Breaking the Moral Rules

- The ultimate moral and spiritual compass in Mahayana Buddhism is the vow to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. This is the first of the Great Vows recited daily by Zen Buddhists: "However limitless sentient beings are, I vow to liberate them all." Whether a particular act is good or not and whether a certain precept is a helpful guide to conduct in a particular situation can be determined in terms of whether it helps or hinders the fulfillment of the vow.

- The more one becomes motivated by this vow, the more this moral compass is discovered within and the less need one has for external prescriptions and proscriptions—that is to say, the more one naturally embodies the spirit of the law and the less bound one is to the artificial letter of the law. Along with other Zen masters and the rest of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Dōgen affirms that bodhisattvas may at times need to break the precepts out of compassionate use of "skillful means" in their endeavor to liberate all sentient beings.

- The most famous account of skillful means is found in the Lotus Sutra's parable about a father who saves his children from a burning house by telling them that their favorite toy carts are waiting for them outside. The point of this parable is that a bodhisattva can and indeed should use the expedient means of telling a noble lie for the sake of ultimately conveying a liberating truth.

PROTECTING INSECTS

The strictest of Jains wear a veil over their mouths and sweep the ground in front of them to avoid accidentally inhaling or stepping on any tiny insects.

Pacifism and Vegetarianism

- Buddhism does not teach absolute pacifism, though nonviolence is a cardinal virtue in all three of the major religions that originated in ancient India: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It is the Jains who take this teaching to the most literal extremes.

- Before eating their vegetarian meals, Zen monastics chant a verse of gratitude and a vow to put the nourishment to good use. The Buddha himself was not an absolute vegetarian.

He did instruct monks not to encourage others to kill animals on their behalf, but he also told them to eat whatever was put in their begging bowls.

- Indeed, the Buddha is thought by many to have died from eating some rotten pork that was served to him. Given the pragmatic nature of the Buddha's teachings, it is not surprising that in some lands in which people depend on eating animals for survival, such as Tibet, carnivorous Buddhist cultures have developed. The key question for Buddhists is how to minimize the suffering caused by violence since the complete abolition of violence is unrealistic.

SUGGESTED READING

Aitken, *The Mind of Clover*.

Anderson, *Being Upright*.

Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Dōgen suggest that, in the course of practice, "do good" becomes a description rather than a prescription?

2 Why are bodhisattvas allowed to break moral rules in their use of skillful means?

THE ZONE OF ZEN: THE FREEDOM OF NO-MIND

LESSON 17

According to Zen, freedom is not really a matter of being free from karmic causality but rather a matter of freely participating in karmic causality. This lesson discusses what it's like to experience the freedom of moving in intuitive attunement with the fluid forces at work in ourselves and the world.

The Open Mind of a Child

- Zen masters speak of regaining a natural freedom and compassion that has gotten covered over and clogged up not just by social conventions but also by psychological forces—especially the greed and hate that are rooted in the primal delusion that our egos and our interests are separate from those of others. The famous modern Japanese Rinzai Zen master Yamada Mumon was fond of quoting Jesus's words: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

- As we grow up, we accumulate knowledge in our relentless pursuit of pleasure, profit, power, and prestige. We learn to judge things according to whether they help or hinder us in attaining these things. Our minds are filled—clouded over and clogged up—with plans for procuring them.

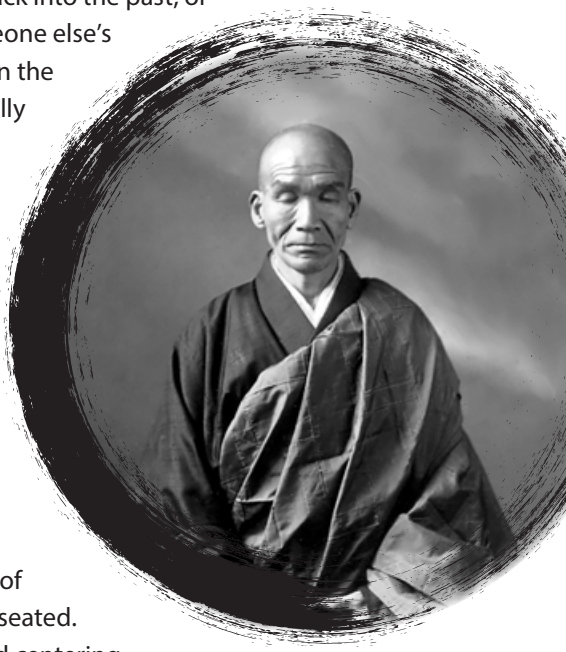
- Yamada Rōshi says Zen meditation—zazen—is a matter of returning to the open mind and heart of a small child. It is a practice of emptying the mind, of returning to what Zen calls a state of *mushin*, which means "no-mind." This an open mind that is able to respond to everything because it is not fixated on anything. Zen masters are not counseling us to become childish in our thinking but rather to become childlike in the sense of recovering the original purity and openness of our hearts and minds.

- "Being in the zone" is probably the best expression we have for what Zen means by the state of no-mind. For instance, when tennis players are able to forget about everything else and just concentrate on the serve, that's when champions are born.

A Gateway into the Zone of Zen

- Zen is a practice of diving into the flow of life, of swimming in concert with its currents and being fully present each stroke of the way. We can get better at doing that through zazen.

- When we first sit in meditation, our minds are restless—running forward into the future, back into the past, or across the room into someone else's business. Concentrating on the breath, we nonjudgmentally become aware of this restlessness. We acknowledge but do not get upset about the fact that we have the urge to fidget or even to get up and go do something else.



- Zazen is not just seated meditation in the literal sense but, more deeply and importantly, a matter of letting the heart-mind be seated. It is a matter of finding and centering oneself in an inner stillness that remains undisturbed in the midst of movement.

Living without Why

- One of Zen's most often repeated kōan questions is, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?" In other words, what was on his mind, what was his intention, in undergoing the arduous journey by means of which he transmitted Zen from India to China?

- The answer to this question must express the very essence of Zen because Bodhidharma is the figure of the enlightened heart-mind that strives to liberate all sentient beings by enlightening them. Yet the Zen master Linji tells us that if Bodhidharma "had had any purpose, he couldn't have saved even himself."

- In the deepest sense, Bodhidharma's travels and deeds were unselfishly and unselfconsciously autotelic; they were ends in themselves rather than just being steps on the way to somewhere else. He teaches and liberates the same way that he sleeps when tired and eats when hungry. He brings peace to others because he is at peace with himself.

TRUE FREEDOM

Zen teaches that true freedom is not freedom from nature; it is freedom in nature, a freedom of naturalness or a natural freedom.

A Difficult Task

- Of course, while living "without why," wholly immersed in the activity at hand, may be a deep spiritual teaching, it is also a tall order. Most of us are capable of it only in fleeting moments, and we need to be patient with our need for reasons, goals, and hopes. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that this powerful teaching can and has been coopted by less enlightened and enlightening persons.

- Disturbingly, many Zen masters supported Japanese militarism leading up to and during the Pacific War, and they applied traditional Zen teachings such as no-mind to the mental training of soldiers. Many of these soldiers no doubt went on to fight bravely and honorably, but at least some of them went on to commit atrocious war crimes on and off the battlefield.

- The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna tells us that misunderstanding the teaching of emptiness is like grabbing a snake by the wrong end—if you grab it by the tail rather than the head, it will twist around and bite you. Something similar could be said of the practice of no-mind.

SUGGESTED READING

Mann, *When Buddhists Attack*.

Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*.

Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does what Zen calls no-mind and non-doing relate to what we call being in the zone and the flow experience?

2 What are the possible dangers of a half-baked "just do it" state of mind?

ZEN LESSONS FROM NATURE:

THE GIVING LEAVES

LESSON 18

Freedom and responsibility, according to Zen, are not found by way of transcending the forces and flows of nature but rather by way of getting back in touch with them. This lesson discusses how virtues such as generosity can be learned by returning to a more intimate relation with the natural world.

Meditative Work

- Zazen and working on kōans are only part of what goes on in a Zen monastery. Much of the time, monks, nuns, and lay practitioners dwelling there are engaged in *samu*—that is, meditative work.

- Samu is a practice of engaging wholeheartedly with the task at hand—cleaning, cooking, gardening, and so forth—in the concentrated yet fluid state of no-mind. Samu also involves cooperating with one's coworkers and communing with the natural world.

- In Zen monasteries today, except during the intensive meditation retreats known as *sesshin*, monastics generally spend more time in the active practice of samu than they do in the stillness of zazen. They grow and prepare most of their own food, chop their own firewood, and weed and rake their own gardens.

The Big Potlatch of Nature

- The great American Zen poet Gary Snyder spoke of the natural world as "the big potlatch." Snyder first practiced Zen in Japan at a monastery in Kyoto, Shōkokuji. After returning to the United States, he combined his study of the way of Zen with his study of Native American ways of appreciating and participating in the wider world of wild nature. In one of his most celebrated works,

The Practice of the Wild, Snyder writes:

> Most of humanity—foragers, peasants, or artisans … have understood the play of the real world, with all its suffering, not in simple terms of "nature red in tooth and claw" but through the celebration of the gift-exchange quality of our give-and-take.

- We need to learn how to better—more consciously and gratefully—participate in this great circulation of giving and taking. This is one of the lessons we can glean from Shel Silverstein's book *The Giving Tree*. Some see the tree in this story as representing a parent and the boy a child. But the tree in the story has also been understood to represent nature, while the boy represents humankind.

- As the boy grows up and eventually grows old, the tree gives and gives: apples to eat and later to sell, branches to swing on and later to make a house with, a trunk to cut down and carve out to make a boat with, and finally a stump for the boy to sit and rest on once he has grown old. The utterly unselfish tree never asks for anything in return. It finds its happiness in providing for the boy's happiness. But the boy does not return the favor. The giving is a one-way street.

- One of the striking things about Silverstein's book is the fine line it walks between teaching and preaching. Like all great parables and children's tales, it tells a story and lets us ponder the point. The tree in the story never blames the boy. It just continues to find new ways to grant him happiness.

- And yet, after playing with the tree as a child, the boy grows into a restless and egocentric man. The boy never learns to participate in the great potlatch of life.

Giving without Expectations

- To some extent, we all realize that giving is important. But what does it really mean to give? The tree in *The Giving Tree* teaches by example. One of the profoundest lessons of the book is perhaps that to truly give or give back, we need to give without expecting a return gift.

- Of course, we should respect and protect other people's rights and entitlements, and it is often proper to stand up for our own. But even while fighting for justice and demanding results, to remain without expectations is a highly demanding but also deeply liberating spiritual practice.

- Hindus call this karma yoga. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna teaches this practice of immersing oneself totally in activities that benefit the world without obsessing over the "fruits of the act." He promises that the karma yogi ends up experiencing the greatest fruits of her actions precisely because she is not attached to them.

POTLATCHES

The term *potlatch* is a Pacific Northwest Native American word for the lavish gift-giving feasts at which rich people would give much of their wealth away, assuring that goods were circulated among the entire community and neighboring tribes. Considered wasteful and contrary to capitalistic values of accumulation, it was strictly banned by European conquerors in the 19th century.

However, practices of potlatch in tribal societies around the globe serve to build and maintain relationships between human beings. It is, on the contrary, hoarding that severs the bonds between humans, creating a wealth gap that breeds resentment and false feelings of superiority.

Natural Gateways into Zen

- Zen Buddhism often emphasizes the lessons to be learned from the natural world. In this regard, it draws deeply on Daoism and also resonates with the indigenous Japanese tradition of Shintō. Thousands of temples and shrines can be found throughout both the cityscapes and the countryside of Japan, each one an oasis of natural beauty and a site of spiritual communion with nature.

- Shintō shrines are often built around or near a magnificent tree or rock; a trickling stream sometimes runs through them or a gate stands out into a lake or bay. In China, Zen monasteries were traditionally built on mountains, and so head temple complexes in Japan, even those in the middle of metropolises, are still referred to as *honzan*—"main mountains."

- The enlightening sounds of nature are often extolled by Zen masters. For example, the 13th-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen says, "The sounds of the valley streams are the Buddha's long, broad tongue."

- Zen masters often direct their students' attention to natural things: the oak tree in the garden, the blue mountains, the sound of the valley streams. All beings are the Buddha-nature, teaches Dōgen.

- Natural beings are not deluded and thus have no need for enlightenment. They simply and freely give themselves over to their interconnected lives among the rest of the worldwide web of reality, taking what they need and giving back what they don't without a thought.

- However, the ways in which humans are called on to participate in the way of nature are not the same as the ways in which other beings participate. We may learn something about stillness and sturdiness from watching a frog sit on a rock, yet we are neither frogs nor rocks: Not only do we need softer meditation cushions, but we are capable and called on to do many things that frogs and rocks cannot and need not do.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "Natural Freedom."

Okumura, *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra*.

Wirth, *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is the practice of samu (meditative work) in Zen, and how does it bring practitioners into a more intimate relation with nature?

2 What does Zen and Mahayana Buddhism in general call the perfection of giving, and how is it that we can learn this virtue from the natural world?

Meditation Checkup:
Three Ways of Breathing In and Out

The conclusion of Lesson 18 is a meditation checkup focused on the breath. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following information serves as a summary of the checkup, which covers three methods of breathing in and out.

Breathing as a Cycle of Giving and Receiving

- This checkup's first method is called breathing as a cycle of giving and receiving. It is, in effect, a meditative practice of becoming more open to the greatest gift we receive from leaves and also more aware of how we give back. To live, we need to repeatedly breathe in oxygen, which comes from marine plants, from rainforests, and from the leaves on the trees we see through the windows of our homes and offices.

- The beauty of our conspiracy with the leaves is that while our bodies take in oxygen and give back carbon dioxide, the leaves do the reverse: They take in carbon dioxide and give back oxygen. Our lives depend on plants such as trees, and their lives depend on animals such as us.

- The next time you sit in meditation, after settling down and settling in, become aware of where your breath is coming from and where it is going to. Follow your breath all the way from and all the way back to the leaves outside.

- Breathing in, become aware that the oxygen that enlivens you is a gift from the leaves outside and from all their cousins in the oceans and forests around the world. Breathing out, become aware that you are giving back to the leaves the carbon dioxide that they need to survive and thrive.

Exhaling the Self, Inhaling the Universe

- This lesson's second method of meditation is called exhaling the self, inhaling the universe. It is not just a method of communing with nature; it is a method of uniting with the universe. It aims to dissolve the dualistic barrier that we habitually construct around ourselves—that is, the wall that we think and feel separates us from the rest of the world.

- Once you have settled into a fairly concentrated stillness, begin this simple yet boundlessly mind-expanding practice:

  1. On the out-breath, breathe yourself out into the universe. Exhale everything you have and everything that you are. Give up everything, totally trusting that the universe into which you release yourself will, in return, breathe life back into you.

  2. On the in-breath, receive the entire universe into the vacated space of your heart-mind. Let the entire universe enter into your empty vessel. More concretely still, breathe the universe all the way through your chest and down into your belly. Relaxing your abdomen muscles, let your belly expand so far that it feels as if it were taking in and harboring the whole universe.

- Insofar as you have breathed yourself out completely into the universe, you have infinitely expanded your borders, which means that you have in effect dissolved them. If you want to possess everything, you have to give up all possessions. If you want to enter into a loving union with everyone and everything, you have to give up the egoistic sense of a self that is separated from others.

Cultivating Compassion

- Tibetan Buddhism employs a powerful meditation technique for cultivating compassion termed *tonglen*, which means "giving and taking." All schools of Mahayana Buddhism, including Zen, understand the practice of a bodhisattva in terms of what is called, in Japanese, *bakku-yoraku*, which means "taking away pain and suffering, and giving peace and joy." In Tibet, tonglen developed as a wonderfully concrete meditation method of visualizing this twofold practice.

- As taught by the second Dalai Lama in the 16th century, you are to begin this method by visualizing your mother and bringing to mind all that she has given you, starting with the fact that she literally and painfully gave birth to you. Feeling compassion for all that she has undergone, generate a deep desire to relieve her of any pain and suffering she may be experiencing, and to impart to her peace and joy.

- On the in-breath, imagine yourself taking away her pain and suffering in the form of a dark cloud. Then, on the out-breath, imagine exhaling into her peace and joy in the form of bright light.

- Having begun with your mother, or with whomever you are most easily able to generate feelings of compassion toward, move on to do the same practice for a while with regard to a friend. Later, when you are ready, do the practice with regard to a stranger. Finally, and only when you are ready for the challenge, do the practice with regard to someone you are inclined to think of as an enemy.

- Tonglen is a powerful form of compassion-generating meditation. It is best to practice tonglen only when you have developed a fairly stable meditation practice and have become, at least to some degree, at peace with yourself.

ZEN ART:
CULTIVATING NATURALNESS
LESSON 19

This lesson discusses the Zen-inspired artistic ways called *dō*, which is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character for the term *dao*, as in Daoism. The lesson also talks about Zen gardens as one special form of Zen art, and it discusses some key concepts of Zen aesthetics.

Cultivating Naturalness

- In Japan, art and culture are not typically seen as essentially opposed to nature and naturalness. The modern Zen philosopher Hisamatsu Shin'ichi lists naturalness (*jinen*) as one of the distinctive characteristics of Zen art.

- Hisamatsu is careful to distinguish this naturalness from mere unrefined "naïveté or instinct." The artistic naturalness at issue here is "never forced or strained," and yet that does not mean that it simply occurs in nature without human intention or effort.

- "On the contrary," Hisamatsu says, "it is the result of a full, creative intent that is devoid of anything artificial or strained." It is the outcome of "an intention so pure and so concentrated … that nothing is forced." Hisamatsu concludes that it "is not found either in natural objects or in children. True naturalness is the 'no mind' or 'no intent' that emerges from the negation both of naïve or accidental naturalness and ordinary intention."

- Culture allows us to actualize our humanity, and cultivation requires refraining from acting according to the arbitrary beck and call of every childish impulse and desire. And yet, the process of acculturation and humanization is not simply a departure from nature; it is rather the development of a specifically human capacity for participating in nature. This development requires a double negation: first a negation of uncultivated nature and second a negation of cultivated artificiality.

- In Japan, the cultural art forms known as ways provide patterns and practices for cultivating natural spontaneity, harmony, beauty, efficiency, effectiveness, and creativity. These include the ways of tea, flower arrangement, calligraphy, incense, and various martial arts. The masters and practitioners of these often understand them to be rooted in Zen.

- Japanese ways include three stages called *shu*, *ha*, and *ri*. These terms mean "preserving," "breaking with," and "departing from." We can rephrase them in terms of "conforming," "rebelling," and "creating."

- The three stages can be seen in the discipline of monastic training as well as in the Japanese ways that are inspired by Zen. In working on a kōan, for example, one has to learn to see with the eyes and hear with the ears of the Zen ancestors in the stories before one is able to make the kōan one's own and present one's response to it in full confidence. And only after passing many kōans could one eventually become capable of creating one's own.

Zen Gardens

- One of the striking characteristics of Zen is the way in which nature, naturalness, art, and beauty are deeply interwoven with spirituality. In Zen, art, nature, and spirituality are intimately connected. This is why Zen temples and monasteries always include gardens.

- In a sense, Zen gardens can be understood as an art of literally representing nature: not reproducing it in an essentially different medium, but rather representing the macrocosm of the natural world in a carefully curated microcosmic space.

Many famous Zen rock gardens are designed as microcosmic representations of the macrocosmic natural world: Raked sand evokes oceans and rivers, rocks mimic islands and mountains, and so forth.

- These gardens do not replicate nature in an artificial medium. They are themselves part of nature. Moreover, the human artists who cultivate these gardens and the spectators who view and commune with them are not supernatural aliens but rather natural beings recovering a sense of their place in the natural world.

- Japanese gardens often use a technique called *shakkei*, meaning "borrowed landscape." The natural environment is allowed to appear as the background and even as an extension of the garden. Conversely, the garden appears as a part of the whole of nature.

Borderlines that Connect and Separate

- For Zen, the idea of nondualism does not mean that there are no differences. Rather, it means that the borders that separate things are at the same time the membranes that connect them. On the one hand, the border between the inside of a Japanese temple or house and the garden outside is clearly marked.

- On the other hand, this is a porous border; sliding doors open so as to allow the circulation of air between the inside and outside regions of the world. Something similar can be said for the fences, walls, or hedges that demarcate where the cultivated garden ends and the uncultivated environment begins.

- The world is made up of singular and distinct things, persons, and events which are, at the same time, intimately interconnected. For instance, a location's tearoom and its garden are separate and yet connected. Each one is not the other, and yet each one cannot fully be what it is without the other.

Wabi Sabi: Imperfect and Impermanent

- The Zen arts also remind us of the impermanence of all things and of the interconnectedness of life and death. They remind us that we cannot truly live unless we acknowledge our own fragility and mortality along with the ephemeral uniqueness of all that we hold dear.

- Since ancient times, the Japanese have celebrated the poignant beauty of the cherry blossoms not despite but rather because of their ephemerality. Bursting into bloom for just a few short days, the cherry blossoms are most beautiful as they flutter to the ground. Nearly everyone takes time out of their busy lives to sit and sing under the trees, bathing in their transient beauty.

- A more specifically Zen aesthetic is that of *wabi-sabi*, a phrase infamously difficult to translate. Wabi-sabi can be sensed in the rustic simplicity and solitude of a weathered mountain hut as well as in the handmade and well-worn implements of the tea ceremony. Imagine, for example, a chipped ceramic tea bowl that is cherished for its unique imperfections and aged earthiness.

- The aesthetic sensibility of wabi-sabi affirms what Buddhism calls the three marks of existence: the insubstantiality and impermanence of all things and the sorrow that accompanies a yearning to transcend this ephemeral and imperfect world. Yet as the Japanese philosopher Tanaka Kyūbun points out, wabi-sabi also expresses a radical reaffirmation of our mortal lives once we let go of any world-negating aesthetic or spiritual aspirations toward otherworldly transcendence.

- The Zen aesthetic of wabi-sabi reminds us to appreciate the lives of things and our own lives because of—rather than despite—the fact that they are fragile and ephemeral. It manifests a mature spirituality that does not flee from the impermanence and imperfection of our lives and all that we care about.

SUGGESTED READING

Addiss, *The Art of Zen*.

Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*.

Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why does Zen think that, paradoxically, we need to cultivate naturalness?

2 How do Zen gardens enable us to experience the relationship between human art and the natural world differently?

ZEN AND WORDS:
BETWEEN SILENCE AND SPEECH
LESSON 20

Zen's stance or stances toward language can appear to be highly ambivalent, paradoxical, and even at times contradictory. On the one hand, Zen masters repeatedly instruct their students to go beyond words. One must, they stress, holistically experience enlightenment oneself, not just read about someone else's experience of it. On the other hand, Zen has produced more texts than perhaps any other Buddhist tradition.

Zen Texts

- Buddhism has no bible—no single infallible book of revelation. It has hundreds of sutras, each proclaiming to be, in some sense, the words of the Buddha. And it has thousands of commentaries, philosophical treatises, and other types of writings. The Zen tradition alone has produced hundreds of volumes—and counting.

- The 9th-century Chinese Zen master Huangbo hesitated to allow his lay disciple to record and distribute his teachings. In response to being handed a poem, Huangbo responded: "If things could be expressed like this with ink and paper, what would be the purpose of a sect like ours?" Some Zen texts even tell of masters tearing up sutras or burning the printing blocks of a popular kōan collection, urging their students not to get lost in the "entangling vines" of words and letters.

- However, such reticence or antipathy is only part of the story of Zen's stance or stances toward language. Indeed, striking affirmations of the expressive power of language abound in the Zen tradition. For instance, the 15th-century Japanese Zen poet Ten'in Ryūtaku states this claim: "Outside poetry there is no Zen, outside of Zen there is no poetry."

Using Words to Point beyond Words

- To understand Zen, we must be able to understand both the limits and the expressive power of language. The Zen tradition often foregrounds the teaching that we need to first free ourselves from our linguistic strictures. It is said in this regard that words are at best like fingers pointing at the moon, not the enlightening moon itself.

- Of course, Zen teachers do not say that one should not read or listen to their teachings. As the modern Japanese Zen master Yamada Mumon points out, "it is only because there is a teaching that there is something transmitted separate from it." He suggests that the teachings are necessary but not sufficient for enlightenment.

- The 12th-century Chinese Zen master Dahui, who advocated the use of kōans rather than the practice of "silent illumination," nevertheless stressed that the point of words is to point beyond words. This meant, for Dahui, to point back behind the differentiations of words to the mind that is the undifferentiated source of differentiations.

- No amount of intellectualizing about reality can help you solve the great problem of life and death, the problem of samsara. Dahui admonishes armchair intellectuals, saying, "Your whole life you've made up so many little word games, when the last day of your life arrives, which phrases are you going to use to oppose birth and death?"

Midway between Silence and Speech

- Zen pushes us to go beyond language, yet it also insists that we must speak. Dahui pushes us to go beyond even a one-sided negation of words, saying: "This Matter can neither be sought by the mind nor obtained by no-mind. It can neither be reached through words nor penetrated through silence."

- A canonical reference to the transcendence of language is found in the Vimalakirti Sutra, a highly revered text in the Zen tradition. The climax of this sutra is generally held to be the layman Vimalakirti's "thunderous silence," with which he demonstrates what it means to "truly enter the gate of nonduality" without using a word or even a syllable.

- The modern Rinzai Zen master Shibayama Zenkei warns us that Vimalakirti's silence must not be misunderstood as silence in opposition to speech. Indeed, earlier in the Vimalakirti Sutra itself, a wise goddess reprimands the Hinayana representative Shariputra for remaining silent and for claiming that "Emancipation cannot be spoken of in words." The goddess teaches him: "Words, writing, all are marks of emancipation. … Therefore, Shariputra, you can speak of emancipation without putting words aside."

Ice Cream as an Analogy

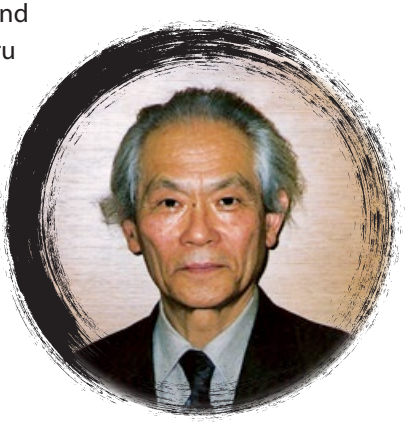
- Whether Zen experience is expressed through speech or silence, the sense of what is said or not said may be only partially or not at all intelligible to those who are not acquainted with the reference—that is, with the experience itself. To make a crude analogy, one may read enough books about the differences between flavors of ice cream to be able to make a lot of sensible claims about them, but if one has not actually tasted those different flavors of ice cream, one does not really know what one is talking about.

- They may not have had scoops of ice cream 1,000 years ago in China, but they probably did have many flavors of dumplings. And they certainly did have hot and cold water. Cups of hot and cold water may look the same from the outside, but the experience of drinking them is very different, hence the Zen saying, "to know for oneself hot and cold."

- Therefore, we can understand why Zen masters would stress, in different contexts, both the limits and the expressive power of language. Taken on its own, a linguistic indication of an enlightening experience is like a sign saying that water is hot. Yet taken in conjunction with the experience itself, linguistic expressions have the potential not only to convey but also to embody, evolve, and enrich the experience of enlightenment.

Exiting and Reentering Language

- The modern Zen philosopher and lay Rinzai master Ueda Shizuteru has written extensively on the question of language in Zen. Ueda's illuminating interpretations of Japanese and Western poetry reveal both the limits and the expressive power of language. He shows how we can understand Zen's apparent wavering between stressing either the limits or the expressive power of language not as a problem that plagues Zen but rather as a dynamic interplay that is essential to it.



- Ueda refers to the 17th-century Japanese Zen master Bankei as saying, in effect, that one must first "exit language" to attain the dharma eye with which to "exit into language" to understand and express the dharma in words. Ueda finds this bidirectional movement away from and back into language epitomized in the twin practices that lie at the core of the Rinzai Zen tradition: zazen and sanzen, silent meditation and verbal interviews with a teacher.

- The apparent contradictions in Zen between negating and affirming language can be understood as exhortations to participate in the interplay of this twofold movement. One must go beyond language to experience things afresh, and one must bring this fresh experience of things back into language.

- Philosophers since Aristotle have pointed out that human beings are animals who are distinguished by their capacity for language. As Hellen Keller's remarkable story reveals, we cannot truly live as human beings without words. However, it is also true that we cannot live entirely enclosed inside them. Rather, we live, as Ueda says, in the ceaselessly circulating movement of "exiting language and exiting into language."

- Zen practice, especially the Rinzai Zen practice of going back and forth between long periods of silent meditation and intense one-on-one interviews, slows down and intensifies this movement between exiting and reentering language. It is thus no surprise that this Zen tradition has spawned such an amazingly fresh and vibrant body of poetry and prose.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "Expressing Experience."

Heine, "On the Value of Speaking and Not Speaking."

Ueda, "Language in a Twofold World."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How does Zen both stress the limits of language and celebrate the expressive power of language?

2 What does Ueda Shizuteru mean by exiting language and then exiting into language?

Meditation Checkup:
Chanting as a Meditative Practice

The conclusion of Lesson 20 is a meditation checkup focused on chanting. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson. The following information serves as a summary of the checkup.

Background on Chanting

- All religious traditions involve forms of meditation, prayer, or worship that involve memorizing, reciting, chanting, or singing words. One reason is so that we can emotionally internalize, embody, and be inspired by the words rather than just intellectually comprehend them. To emotionally internalize them means to allow them to become what literally moves us from within.

- The most commonly chanted text in Zen and in Mahayana Buddhism generally is the Heart Sutra. Compared to the Four Great Vows, chanting this text is for many less a matter of cognitively than of reflecting on its content. However, many dharma books are devoted to elucidating the sense of the Heart Sutra, and many serious practitioners do infuse their chanting with an understanding of its core teachings.

- The conceptual meaning is least important in the case of texts termed *dharanis*, several of which are very regularly chanted in Zen temples and monasteries. In Japan, they are written in Chinese characters that approximate the sound of Sanskrit words, regardless of the meaning of the Chinese characters themselves. It is less important to ponder a dharani's meaning than it is to vocalize the sound intently and correctly.

Dharanis and Zen

- Scholars continue to debate the extent to which a belief in the magical efficacy of dharanis has played an important role in Zen, as it has and still does in other schools of Buddhism, such as the esoteric Shingon school in Japan and the Vajrayana schools in Tibet. In Japanese Zen monasteries, dharanis are indeed chanted wholeheartedly and multiple times a day, starting in the early hours of the morning.

- According to D. T. Suzuki, "Properly speaking, the dharani has no legitimate place in Zen." However, although he claims that "they convey no intelligent signification," Suzuki does acknowledge that "the practical result of these utterances is not to be judged objectively."

- Chanting dharanis can be experienced as a powerful practice of cultivating meditative concentration. Practiced in that way, the literal meaning of the words is not so important. However, at the same time, the general sense of the dharani should not be discounted.

ZEN AND PHILOSOPHY:
THE KYOTO SCHOOL

LESSON 21

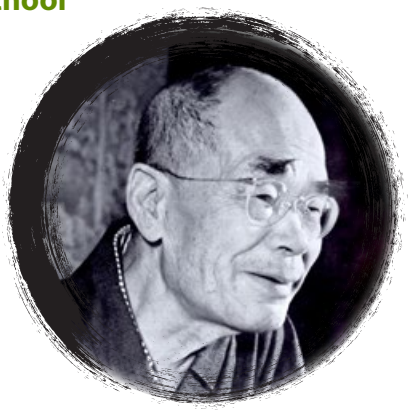
This lesson focuses on the relation between Zen and philosophy. By the time Zen started developing in China in the 6th century, Chinese Buddhists had already largely mastered the complex philosophies of the Buddhist schools that had been imported from India starting some 500 years earlier. Chinese Buddhists had even started developing some of their own philosophical schools, such as the Huayan school.

Zen Practice and Intellection

- It is sometimes said that Huayan provides the philosophical theory for Zen practice. However, Zen does not understand itself to be simply the practical application of a theory. For Zen, this would be to put the cognitive cart before the holistic horse.

- Abstract theory is seen as derivative of concrete practice, not the other way around. Accordingly, for centuries Zen has emphasized embodied-spiritual practice over merely cerebral intellection. At times, however, this emphasis has unfortunately derailed the holistic path of Zen into the muddy waters of anti-intellectualism.

D. T. Suzuki and the Kyoto School



- More than anyone else, D. T. Suzuki is responsible for having introduced Zen to America and the rest of the world over the course of his long and productive life. His writings on Zen span from the 1910s to the 1960s.

- Especially in his earlier works, he often stressed the need to go beyond, or dig down beneath, cerebral intellection. Suzuki viewed the intellect as subordinate to, or rather as lying on the surface of something deeper.

- However, Suzuki increasingly stressed the need to develop what he called a "Zen thought" that would philosophically express "Zen experience." As Richard Jaffe points out, "Suzuki was very deliberate in his project to create a modern Zen, or as he put it, 'to elucidate its ideas using modern intellectual methods.'"

- Suzuki even stressed the need to develop a "logic" of Zen, and he praised his lifelong friend and the founder of the Kyoto school, Nishida Kitarō, for his great achievements in this regard.

- The Kyoto school is a group of 20th- and 21st-century Japanese philosophers who have sought to bring Zen and Pure Land Buddhism into dialogue with Western philosophy and religion. Nishida's most prominent successor was Nishitani Keiji, and Nishitani's most prominent successor was Ueda Shizuteru.

- All three of them were committed Zen practitioners as well as academic philosophers. Both Nishitani and Ueda were recognized as lay Rinzai Zen masters. Other philosophers associated with the Kyoto School who were also accomplished Zen practitioners and teachers include Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and Abe Masao (known in the West as Masao Abe). According to Ueda and other Kyoto School philosophers, Zen and philosophy should be related but not conflated.

Nishida's Early Philosophy

- In the preface to his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida writes that, for him, "religion … constitutes the consummation of philosophy." The book culminates with a section on religion in which he develops a dialectical and panentheistic conception of God.

- Yet throughout, Nishida understands his method to be thoroughly philosophical. He sometimes even calls his method thoroughly scientific, not only because it is rational but also because he attempts to base his reflections purely on unadulterated empirical evidence.

- For Nishida, scientific accounts of reality are true, but they are not the whole truth. Science does not even give us the whole truth of our experience of nature. Nishida thought that spirit

and nature—or mind and matter—are two halves of a whole, and that we only grasp half of reality if we separate one from the other.

Nishida's View of God

- In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida says that God is "the unifier of pure experience that envelops the universe." The more we get back in touch with our own pure experience at each moment of our lives, the more we get back in touch with God as "an infinite unifying power that functions directly and spontaneously from within each individual."

- Nishida does not look for the most profound religiosity in supernatural miracles. Like Einstein, he thinks that the laws of nature are themselves God's revelation, so there is no need for them to be broken for God to be revealed. Rather, Nishida finds the most profound religiosity in a trans-mystical experience of the here and now, the experience of what he later calls "radical everydayness."

- Although Nishida's view of God or Buddha—names which he often uses interchangeably—might seem closer to a monistic pantheism than to a dualistic theism, Nishida rejects both of these labels. In his last essay, written just before his death in 1945, he says that his understanding of the relation between God, the world, and the self could perhaps be understood in terms of "panentheism," meaning not simply that "all is God" but rather that "all is in God."

- However, Nishida goes on to say that even panentheism falls short of expressing the dynamically dialectical relation between God and the self. That relation ultimately occurs through what he calls "inverse correspondence," which means that God and the self are both self-negating. God and the self enter into one another by way of negating or emptying themselves.

Stepping Back through Nihilism

- Nishida's successor Nishitani was the first Kyoto school philosopher to take seriously the problem of nihilism. Like other thinkers, Nishitani associates the rise of modern nihilism with the ramifications of Nietzsche's horrifying—yet also, Nietzsche thought, potentially liberating—proclamation that "God is dead."

- Today, we must confront the swelling sense that God does not exist at all. Atheists may celebrate the demise of belief in God, while theists may bemoan it. But everyone must come to grips with the fact that modern science and the materialism of secular society have at least decentered the role of religion for many in the modern world.

- Nishitani views the crisis of nihilism as an opportunity to rediscover a more profound and more genuine religiosity, which many people would call spirituality. Nishitani claims that we must not flee from nihilism, closing our eyes and ears and just shouting our dogmatic beliefs to ourselves and at others.

- Rather, we must go all the way through the bottom of nihilism. Only if we "overcome nihilism by way of passing through nihilism," he suggests, can we awaken to the true nature and home-ground of our existence.

- Nishitani speaks of this home-ground in Zen Buddhist terms as "the field of emptiness." Insofar as we think of the self and other beings as independent and unchanging substances, we are bound to experience the relative nothingness of nihilism as a threat to everything we believe we are and everything we believe we possess. However, if we "trans-descend" from what Nishitani calls the "field of being" through the "field of nihility" all the way to the "field of emptiness," we can discover a creative and encompassing place of absolute nothingness of which Nishida spoke.

- In an essay titled "The Issue of Practice," Nishitani writes that the modern world has lost an understanding of the importance of holistic ways of practice in which the whole person—body, heart, mind, and spirit—are engaged and educated. We cannot, as it were, simply think our way through nihilism. The step back through nihilism needs to be done with the entirety of the self.

- Nishitani suggests that while the Japanese and other Easterners have much to learn from the Western intellectual way of philosophical thinking, Westerners have much to learn from Eastern ways of holistic practice. These ways include Zen meditation.

SUGGESTED READING

Davis, "Commuting Between Zen and Philosophy."

Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*.

Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is the Kyoto School, and how have some of its members connected the practice of Zen to the study of Western philosophy and religion?

2 What does Nishida Kitarō mean by pure experience and the place of absolute nothingness?

JUST SITTING AND WORKING WITH KŌANS

LESSON 22

The first part of this lesson discusses Dōgen's teachings regarding the strikingly and stringently simple method of *shikantaza*, which means "just sitting." Then, the lesson moves on to look at Hakuin's and other Zen masters' teachings regarding the method of kōan practice.

Just Sitting and Nonthinking

- Dōgen highly valued kōans. Legend has it that the night before returning to Japan from China, he copied by hand the entire text of *The Blue Cliff Record*. He also assembled his own collection of 300 kōans, and many of Dōgen's own writings consist of insightful and creative commentaries on kōan literature.

- However, despite his prolific and profound commentaries on kōans, Dōgen expressly discourages "looking at phrases" while sitting in zazen. As one settles into "steady, immovable sitting," rather than focus on the central term or phrase of a kōan, Dōgen instructs us to: "Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking." These pithy and perplexing words are taken from a dialogue between the 8th-century Chinese Zen master Yaoshan and a monk.

THE *KEISAKU*

The silence and stillness of hours of meditation is occasionally broken by the sharp sound of the keisaku, which is sometimes called in English the warning stick or encouragement stick. The slaps on the back—which sound more painful than they really are—can have three different purposes. To begin with, they can be disciplinary. Second, the slaps on the back are meant to help keep one alert and focused. Finally, the slaps can be used to assist someone who appears to be on the brink of a breakthrough. The slaps are then intended and experienced as an encouragement to push onward. All three of these uses of the keisaku require great attentiveness and maturity on the part of the person wielding the stick, and so only advanced practitioners and teachers are allowed to act as monitors during zazen.

- The kind of thinking we are instructed not to engage in during zazen is the accustomed habit of the mind to look away from itself and toward things. The mind represents these things as objects. The habitually egocentric mind then weighs, measures, calculates, and evaluates these objects according to our interests, preferences, and plans.

- The question is this: How do we let go of this constant stream of egocentric, calculative thinking? Dōgen tells us to "just sit"—*shikantaza*. Just sitting entails neither chasing after thoughts nor chasing them off. Rather, one should just let passing sensations, perceptions, thoughts and feelings come and go as they will. Over time, they will naturally cease to command one's attention.

- Nonthinking is not opposed to thinking. Zen is sometimes mistaken—by misguided proponents as well as mistaken opponents—as entailing and even promoting an anti-intellectualism. Dōgen himself was a remarkably creative and critical thinker as well as an avid reader and prolific writer of texts, even though he advocated regularly stepping back from these activities to just sit at rest in the open awareness of nonthinking.

Just Sitting and Kōan Practice

- Some Rinzai Zen masters have expressed appreciation for shikantaza as the highest and hardest kōan. It gives you nothing in particular to focus on. The point of shikantaza is not to become enlightened but rather to realize that you already are enlightened. You do not need to become a Buddha because you already are one. However, you do need to realize this fact; you do need to awaken to your original Buddha-nature.

- If shikantaza is the slow-simmer approach to this realization, kōan practice is the pressure-cooker approach. In both approaches, trust in the reality of one's Buddha-nature leads to the confidence that arises from actually awakening to it.

THE RIGHT TEACHER

If and when you ever become interested in engaging in kōan practice, you will need to find a Zen teacher to work with. He or she must be an authorized teacher whose personality and style are a good fit for you.

Initial-Barrier Kōans

- This lesson now turns to what Rinzai Zen masters like Hakuin have had to say about working on a kōan, including the initial-barrier kōans used in Rinzai training. Hakuin formulated his own initial-barrier kōan: "What is the sound of one hand?" We know the clapping sound that two hands can make, but what sound does one hand make?

- The answer is not to slap one's hand on the table or to snap one's fingers. Kōans are not gamey riddles, and kōan practice is no joke. It is, physically and psychologically, an extremely demanding endeavor. Indeed, spiritually speaking, it must become a matter of life and death.

- Initial-barrier kōans prod one to dig down beneath all dualities. The one hand is the absolute oneness that embraces and pervades all dualities and differences. It is the absolute nonduality that does not even stand over against dualities, which would, after all, just create one more meta-duality. It is the one dimension, as it were, in which all differences exist.

- To awaken to it, one needs to put all dualistic intellection aside. And yet, when one awakens to it, one realizes that it does not annihilate differences or compete with them in any way. It is rather what lets them be in the first place.

The Rinzai Zen Kōan Curriculum

- While the initial barrier-kōans are crucial, they are but a first step on the very long road of an extensive kōan curriculum in Rinzai Zen. After one has passed an initial barrier kōan, one is assigned many *sassho*. This term is often loosely translated as "checking questions," but these are more similar to follow-up kōans in their own right.

- Early kōans push one to go beyond and beneath words and doctrines to experience more directly the nondual reality they are meant to express. It is like being asked to actually taste a food rather than just read about how it tastes. Later kōans are often more concerned with cultivating an experiential understanding of the so-called dharma reason of Zen teachings. Here, the intellect is reengaged, yet in a manner that allows it to remain rooted in and inseparable from the whole of one's awakened self.

SUGGESTED READING

Loori, *The Art of Just Sitting*.

———, *Sitting with Koans*.

Miura and Sasaki, *The Zen Koan*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What is meant by nonthinking, and why is it not just a matter of zoning out or a state of unconsciousness?

2 What is a kōan, and what is one supposed to do with it?

Meditation Checkup:
Walking Meditation

The conclusion of Lesson 22 is a meditation checkup that introduces walking meditation, which is known as *kinhin* in Japanese. The following information serves as a summary of the checkup. To experience it in full, refer to the audio or video lesson.

BACKGROUND ON KINHIN

Kinhin is more than just a break from sitting. In fact, walking meditation should be understood as a gateway into the most difficult and important practice of all—the practice of daily life. Kinhin is a matter of taking baby steps toward bringing the energized stillness and peaceful clarity awakened and cultivated in zazen into all the activities of our lives.

Tips for Kinhin

- Walking is one of the most common and supposedly simple movements we do. However, when you do it mindfully, you will discover its almost infinite complexity. At first, that discovery can also make it strangely difficult. Suddenly you may feel clumsy; it may feel surprisingly unnatural. It will take some practice to be able to walk fully attentively yet utterly naturally.

- The other problem you may face during walking meditation is that the monkey-mind easily gets bored and tries to stir up trouble. Walking slowly around a room is not enough stimulation for it. It will demand some juicier mind candy than just walking slowly around a room.

- Kinhin is still a cold turkey approach to weaning ourselves off our mind-candy addiction. The point is to return to the present, not to exchange a worldly distraction for a spiritual one.
- This cold turkey approach can be tough. It is hard not to start daydreaming about dinner or start glancing at something or someone across the room. The following three-stage method can help.
    - Stage 1: As you walk, take each step as if it were the very first step you have ever taken in your life. Imagine you had never—until right now—been able to walk. With each brand new step, completely forget about the previous step and take this one as if it were your very first. Be full of joyful awareness of just how wonderful it feels to actually walk. Practice this for five minutes or more.
    - Stage 2: As you walk, take each step as if it were the very last step you'll ever take. Reversing the last story, imagine that you are about to lose your ability to walk. Fully take it in each step, and fully appreciate the experience. Practice this for five minutes or more.
    - Stage 3: As you walk, take each step as if it were both the first step you've ever taken and the last step you'll ever take. In truth, each step is the first and last of its exact kind. Every step is unique. Practice this for at least five minutes or for however long you can attentively sustain it.
- Having practiced this three-stage method, you will be better prepared to walk out of the meditation hall into the wonder of the world. Taking each step as if it were your first and last is walking meditation.

DEATH AND REBIRTH:

OR, NIRVANA HERE AND NOW

LESSON 23

Death is, quite literally, the business of Buddhist temples in Japan, including Zen temples. Most of their income comes from conducting funerals and memorial services. Yet these services do provide real comfort and community to grieving families. Doctrinally speaking, they are thought to transfer karmic merit to the departed person so that he or she goes to a better place.

The Six Realms

- Traditionally in Buddhism, and still in many Buddhist countries, the better place one goes to after death has been thought of as one of the higher of the six realms of rebirth in samsara. The higher three realms are those of human beings, heavenly beings, and fighting spirits. The lower three realms are those of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings.

- In many Buddhist traditions, it is thought that one must transmigrate through these six realms of rebirth for many lifetimes before one has accumulated enough karmic merit to be reborn as a human being in a social situation and psychological state conducive to finally attaining nirvana. Nirvana is thought to be, in some sense, beyond the six realms of rebirth in samsara altogether.

Rebirths

- Japanese Buddhists use a term, *reikon*, that can be translated as the "soul" of the deceased person. However, if pressed, a Japanese Buddhist priest would say that this does not refer to an independent and unchanging entity.

- For Buddhists, the rebirth that is thought to happen after death is not totally unlike the constant rebirth people undergo during this life. This moment-to-moment rebirth is going on all the time.

- A person's personality is constantly developing along with thoughts and emotions, just as the cells of the person's body are constantly dying off and being replaced. One's childhood self has to disappear for his or her adult self to come into existence.

- Changes can be looked at from the perspective of discontinuity or from the perspective of continuity. If we focus on the greatest ruptures of discontinuity, we can speak of physical, psychological, or spiritual death. If we turn our attention to their aspects of continuity, we can also speak of rebirth.

- Undergoing a spiritual death and rebirth is at the heart of all the great religious traditions. It is the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven in Christianity, and it is the only way to resolve the one great matter of life and death here on earth for Zen Buddhists.

Transmigration through the Six Realms

- After the demise of the physical form of the body, Buddhists have traditionally thought that the bundle of the other four aggregates—the collection of psychological factors that makes up the mental and emotional aspects of our life-stream—eventually finds an appropriate new physical body in which to be reincarnated. Usually, this rebirth as reincarnation is determined by karma.

- Karma can be good or bad, but, insofar as karma is at bottom based on ignorance and egoistic craving, it propels one to be reborn in one of the six realms of rebirth in samsara. Even a great philanthropist, insofar as he or she gives out of a desire to be recognized as a giver, will at best be reborn as a heavenly being, which is merely the happiest form of life in samsara.

- Enlightened beings—Buddhas and bodhisattvas—are no longer driven by karma. However, they can voluntarily choose to be reborn in samsara out of the compassionate desire to endlessly work on behalf of liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

Zen Masters and Hell

- "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." According to Dante, those words are written over the gates of hell. Zen masters, by contrast, have high hopes for going to hell. For them, out of bottomless compassion, we should want to go to hell.

- When Zen masters do talk about life after death, they generally talk in parables about being reborn wherever they can be of the most service. The 9th-century Chinese Zen master Zhaozhou said that, when he dies, he "will be the first to fall to Hell." An astonished monk asked, "How can it be that such a great priest as you should fall to Hell ahead of us all?" Zhaozhou responded, "Who will save you when you fall to Hell unless I arrive there first and wait for you?"

A ZEN MASTER'S CONFESSION

We need to be reminded of our impermanence, and we need to face up to our mortality, not primarily so that we can prepare for the afterlife but so that we can undergo the great spiritual death that allows us to live fully here and now. When Confucius was asked about death, he replied: "We do not yet understand life—how could we possibly understand death?" Like the Buddha and Confucius, when asked questions about death, Zen masters are likely to turn the questioner's attention back to life.

- When Zhaozhou's teacher, Nanquan, was asked by a disciple where he will go after he dies, he responded: "I am going to the foot of the hill to be reborn as an ox," presumably so that he could work tirelessly in the fields in service of the poor farmers. These stories stress the central message of Mahayana Buddhism: the vow to work on behalf of liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

SUGGESTED READING

Halifax, *Being with Dying*.

Hoffmann, *Japanese Death Poems*.

Ray, "Rebirth in the Buddhist Tradition."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 What does Zen teach about death and the afterlife?

2 How does Zen suggest that nirvana is to be found in the here and now?

REVIEWING THE PATH OF ZEN:
THE OXHERDING PICTURES
LESSON 24

This lesson comments on a classic and beloved text of the Zen tradition: the Ten Oxherding Pictures. The text consists of a set of pictures together with a preface and poem appended to each one. The original pictures and poems were composed by the 12th-century Chinese Zen master Kuoan. The prefaces were written by Kuoan's successor Ziyuan. Kuoan's original pictures no longer exist, but over the centuries, many artists have recreated them. The most famous rendition is that of the 15th-century Japanese artist Shūbun, who established the Japanese tradition of ink painting.

Overview of the Pictures

- In Kuoan's pictures, the biggest breakthrough comes in picture 8, when everything suddenly disappears, leaving only an empty circle. Before that, in picture 7, the ox suddenly disappears. The ox did not come on the scene until picture 3, which depicts the first breakthrough moment. This means that the ox is actually pictured in only four of the pictures.

- The quest the oxherder embarks on in picture 1 is a search for the true self; it is a journey of self-realization. The oxherder is the seeking self, while the ox is the self that is sought. In other words, the deluded self wants to awaken to its true self, and so sets out in search of it.

- The oxherder finds footprints of the ox in picture 2, and then first catches a glimpse of it in picture 3. In the next three pictures, he catches, tames, and rides the ox home.

Pictures 1 and 2

- The spiritual path in general, and the path of Zen in particular, begins with waking up to the problem that we do not truly know ourselves. In his preface to the first picture, Ziyuan tells us that we have turned our backs on our own true self; we have covered over our own originally enlightened mind.

- In the first picture, the oxherder realizes that he has lost the ox; the deluded self realizes that he is deluded. He is still lost, but since now he knows that he is lost, he has become a seeker. Nevertheless, although he has now set out in search of the ox, he does not yet know where to search.

- In Ziyuan's preface to the second picture, we read: "Relying on the sutras, you understand the principles; by studying the teachings, you come to know the traces left behind." That refers to traces left behind by those who have awakened to the true self. These traces are tracks that tell you which way to go on the path toward self-awakening.

- Additionally, Ziyuan says that at this stage, the oxherder is still not able to "distinguish right from wrong" or to "differentiate true and false." This suggests that an intellectual understanding of the unity of the universe all too easily falls into a one-sided grasp of oneness.

Picture 3

- Initial awakening—one's first experience of kenshō, or seeing into the true nature of the self—takes place in picture 3, which shows the oxherder catching a glimpse of the ox. When the oxherder first lays eyes on his lost ox, he is overjoyed.

- Still, at this stage, there has been only a glimpse of the true self. Having found the ox, the oxherder must now catch and tame it.

Pictures 4–6

- The oxherder catches hold of the ox in picture 4, but now a struggle is taking place. Ziyuan's preface states: "More stubborn than ever and still wild, if you wish to tame it you must use your whip."

- The philosopher Ueda says that although the text attributes stubbornness and wildness to the ox, these are characteristics of the oxherder at this stage. In fact, Ueda says it is the ox that appears to be pulling the oxherder onto the homeward bound path of awakening.

- However, there is another compelling interpretation given by the modern Chinese Zen master Sheng-yen. He suggests that "the ox represents the mind and its activities." As a matter of fact, the ox is referred to in many commentaries as the "ox-mind," and it is not a stretch to understand this to mean the mind in all its unenlightened as well as enlightened activities.

- Kuoan's version of the Ten Oxherding Pictures has the great merit of clearly depicting both the gradual and sudden aspects of training and awakening. Accordingly, the ambiguity of the symbolism of the ox in Kuoan's pictures can be understood as intentional. This intentional ambiguity is especially at play in the middle stages of the path—the stages depicted in pictures 4, 5, and 6—where it appears that the practitioner is both taming and being tamed by the ox.

- In picture 4, we witness an intensely ambivalent struggle. In picture 5, the oxherder is leading the now docile ox. Yet in picture 6, he is leisurely riding on the back of the ox, playing a tune and letting the ox take him wherever he wishes. Effort is giving way to effortlessness as practice becomes a way of life.

- In the many years it generally takes a Zen practitioner to go from stage 4 to stage 6, the great effort of practicing to become enlightened transforms into the wondrously effortless practice of enlightenment. This enlightened effortlessness is not a matter of lazily zoning out but rather a matter of living fully engaged in the zone of Zen.

Picture 7

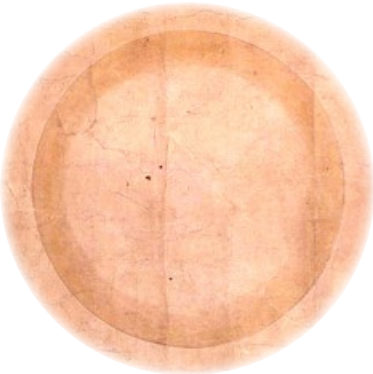
- A major—though still not complete—breakthrough happens in picture 7, which is entitled *Ox Forgotten, Self Remains*. In this picture, the ox has disappeared, and the oxherder sits alone by a mountain hut, at peace with himself and the world.

- Ziyuan's preface to this picture begins with the words: "The Truth is not two; the ox was just posited as a provisional topic." The truth—the dharma—is the ultimate truth about reality that Buddhist teachings are meant to express. For Zen, this is the true self—that is, the self that understands itself to exist as a part of the worldwide web of reality.

- One can imagine the story ending with picture 7. Indeed, some spiritual paths do end with a sage at peace with himself on a mountaintop. Such solitary sages leave the world behind or, at least, leave it as it is. For Zen, this is to have climbed to the top of a 100-foot pole, and yet to be unable or unwilling to leap off—to leap, that is, back into the world filled with dust as well as flowers.

Picture 8

- Picture 8 is entitled *Person and Ox Both Forgotten*. It is simply an empty circle, not a picture of anything at all. It is a great negation, an absolute emptying, of all forms.



- It is said that there are 100 ways to draw this circle and countless ways to understand it. While the ways to understand the circle may be infinite, one of those ways is to understand it as a symbol of infinity. Here, that means infinite possibility, a formlessness pregnant with all possible forms.

- The empty circle is often drawn so as to leave it open, reminding us that it symbolizes a dynamic way that never reaches a static completion. The empty circle can be understood and experienced as the creative source—as well as the peacefully encompassing abode—of all the multifarious things we experience.

Picture 9

- In picture 7 the seeker found his higher, truer self. In picture 8, even that needed to be let go of. Picture 9, which simply depicts a mountain stream flowing under a tree in bloom—without an objectified self in sight—shows how it is easiest to do this in nature.

- It is relatively easy to let beautiful flowers and meandering brooks show themselves in all their natural splendor without getting in their way. As the open heart-mind of the empty circle, the true self makes room for the wonders of nature to manifest as they present themselves. Alas, it is much harder to be enlightened and to enlighten others amid the hustle and bustle of the human world.

Picture 10

- Picture 10 shows an old sage coming down from the mountain, returning to the marketplace, and greeting a young man. It is a Zen depiction of the bodhisattva returning to the world to work on behalf of liberating and enlightening others.

- The figure with outstretched hands who appears in this last picture is a traditional forerunner not only of the modern proponents of Engaged Buddhism but of all those persons, past and present, who bring the peace they have found to others.

- The long journey of the oxherder had reached a premature peak when he, no longer needing the provisional symbol of the ox, become a solitary sage on a mountaintop. In the end, however, his journey leads to a sacrifice of that solitude to bring solace to others.

- The enlightened and enlightening figure in picture 10 is traditionally associated with Budai, a 10th-century Chinese Zen monk who was nicknamed the Laughing Buddha. As legend has it, Budai was a wandering monk who would give away anything that was given to him.

- The Budai-like figure in picture 10 is shown with outstretched hands, offering gifts to the young boy in the scene—including, of course, the greatest gift of pointing the boy down the pathway toward his own enlightening journey. He is, as it were, passing the enlightening torch to the next generation of oxherder.

SUGGESTED READING

Loori, *Riding the Ox Home*.

Ueda, "Emptiness and Fullness."

Yamada, *Lectures on The Ten Oxherding Pictures*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 If the ox that the boy is searching for represents the true self, why does it disappear in the last four pictures?

2 Who is the older man in the last picture, and why does the story end with him coming down from the mountain and entering the city?

Finding a Zen Community

This course concludes with tips on finding a Zen center near your home. A teacher and a community are invaluable aids to any meditator and student of Zen, and they are ultimately necessary for any committed Zen practitioner.

Three Things to Think About

- When checking out a Zen center, think about three things: the teacher, the school, and the community. These three attempt to emulate and embody what in Buddhism are called the three jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

- To be a Buddhist means to take refuge in these three jewels. To take refuge in them means that they are your go-to resources for understanding what life is about and how to best live it. They are what you trust.

- At a Zen center, the teacher, the teachings and practices of the school he or she represents, and the community of practitioners that gather there together constitute the local portal or gateway through which you can access the three jewels. You should take care to find the gateway to the three jewels that you find most inspiring and trustworthy.

Finding a School

- You can do some research on the different Zen schools that have centers in your area. The two main Japanese schools are Rinzai and Sōtō. Many of the Zen centers in the United States and other Western countries belong to or derive from these two Japanese schools, although there are also many centers that are affiliated with Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese schools.

- The Zen that was originally introduced to the West by D. T. Suzuki and others is Rinzai Zen. However, in the meantime, Sōtō Zen centers have become more prevalent in the United States. Part of the reason for this is the relative lack of qualified Rinzai Zen teachers because of the rigors, the linguistic challenges, and the sheer length of the kōan curriculum used in the Rinzai school. Many of the centers which do offer kōan practice in the West are affiliated with a new school that synthesized Sōtō with elements of Rinzai Zen: Sanbō Kyōdan, later renamed Sanbo-Zen.

- It is highly regrettable that two of the historically most prominent Rinzai centers in the United States have both been rocked by scandals involving the sexual misconduct of their masters. Sadly, such scandals have plagued some Sōtō, Sanbo, White Plum, and other Zen centers as well.

- On the bright side, some Zen centers have risen to the occasion and taken the lead in reevaluating the role of ethical precepts, rethinking the authority of the teacher, and reconfiguring institutions for coed monastic and lay practice. This course recommends that you investigate scandals and pay close attention to how centers have responded to them.

- There is no such thing as a good Zen center with a bad teacher. The teacher is at least as important as the school and tradition she or he represents. Read what they have written and especially go and listen to them speak. See how they lead the group. Talk to them in person. No one is perfect, but you should have the sense that this is someone with whom you could practice and from whom you could learn.

- Finally, the community of practitioners is also vitally important. If you feel that the school and the teacher are right for you, there is a good chance that you will also find that the people who gather at that center are the kind of people with whom you can practice and learn.

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